

Toshio Satou Illustration by Nao Watanuki

11

Suppose
a Kid from the
LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved
to a Starter Town



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Toshio Satou

Illustration by
Nao Watanuki



Suppose
a Kid from the LAST DUNGEON
BOONIES Moved to Starter Town

"Guild
Master!?
But you're..."

"Enchantress?
I like it!
Have 50,000
points."

An enchantress
carrying a giant!? But where
has Lloyd seen her before...?



Rinko

Leader of the
Adventurer Guild
Has not aged in twenty
years. A woman
of mystery.



“Belay that!
Nobody
can follow
us across
these
waters.”

“Hmm...
Where is
Fumar’s
ship?”


**Fumar
Ketoshifen**
Leader of Azami’s
Maritime Guild
Known for despising
the king.

A person of interest lies
across the sea...but that’s no
obstacle to Lloyd!



"Um,
Your
Highness..."

"H-Hi
there..."

At last!
I can
tell him
who I
really
am!

They'll have to dance at the ball.
Marie can no longer hide her identity!

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SUPPOSE A KID FROM THE LAST DUNGEON BOONIES MOVED TO A STARTER TOWN 11

TOSHIO SATOU

Translation by Andrew Cunningham

Cover art by Nao Watanuki

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TATOEBA LAST DUNGEON MAENO MURANO SHOUNEN GA JYOBAN NO
MACHI DE KURASUYOUNA MONOGATARI volume 11

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Character Profiles



Lloyd Belladonna

Boy raised in the town of legend. Clueless about his own strength.



Marie the Witch

Mystery shopkeeper. Actually the Princess of Azami.



Alka

Immortal chief of the town of legend. Dotes on Lloyd.



Selen Hemein

Lloyd saved her from a curse. Madly in love with the man of her destiny.



Riho Flavin

Former skilled mercenary. Hoping Lloyd will lead her to fortune.



Phyllo Quinone

A martial artist who insists Lloyd is her master. Also in love with him.



Micono Zol

Upperclassman at Lloyd's school. In love with Marie.



Allan Lidocaine

Noble's son and follower of Lloyd. Now married to Renge.



Luke Thistle Azami

King of Azami. Very curious about the one Marie loves.



Rinko

Leader of the Adventurer Guild. A woman of mystery.



Katsu Kondo

Proxy Master of the Adventurer Guild. Astounded by Rinko's appearance.



Fumar Ketoshifen

Captain of the Maritime Guild. Inexplicably despises the king.



Merthophan Dextro

Former Azami Army Colonel. Currently an agricultural evangelist.



Pamela Siegquelle

Second-year cadet. For reasons, knows a lot about clothes.



Satan

The Demon Lord of the Night. Trained Lloyd's combat skills.



Ruka Akizuki

Alka's original form. She was a genius scientist.



Lena Eung

Eug's original form. She worked with Ruka at the lab.

Prologue

Alka was thinking about the past—about her time at the laboratory.

An ordinary morning at the Cordelia Research Institute.

Nobody suspected a morning like this would change the very world.

Alka—Ruka Akizuki—was rubbing her eyes sleepily, sipping a cup of coffee while typing away on her PDA in the lobby.

Black hair. Twenty-two, with a gaze that belied her years. The bleary eye rub wasn't an act of cuteness, but rather her way of pushing herself to be ready for the task ahead.

Trying to kickstart her blood sugar, she dumped sugar cubes into her coffee. The result was a gloopy mess with a gritty mouthfeel, which she choked down.

As she did, a young man came in, his hair a mess. The wrinkles on his dress shirt and the loosened necktie suggested he'd been out all night—and this did not inspire confidence in his ability to get through his shift.

Naruhiko Seta—not the most reliable coworker, but he'd been here longer than her, and his hairdo arguably gave him some measure of charm.

He saw Alka sipping coffee, helped himself to a cup of water, and plopped down on a chair across from her.

She glanced his way momentarily, but her eyes soon went back to her screen. It was all the attention he deserved.

“That’s it, Alka?! At least act like you care!”

“What for?”

Alka’s voice was a curt grunt, and Seta flailed as if he were a talk show guest desperate to make an impression.

“I’m your superior! Respect is a given!”

“Respect is *earned*.”

He clearly hadn’t done so, but Seta didn’t let the rejection get him down.

“Come on, act like we’ve been here all night, engaged in constructive discourse. That way if Director Ishikura sees us, he won’t suspect a thing! He’ll *definitely* make me scrub the toilets if I provoke his ire today. Again. It’s already happened so many times the cleaning staff think I’m actually one of them...”

He stopped to chug his water. Something about the gesture just screamed “hasn’t been home.”

Alka vaguely remembered seeing his name on the toilet-cleaning charts and rolled her eyes.

“Try going home sometimes,” she suggested.

“Constant affirmation is the only way I can remain motivated.”

Seta spoke of the local nightlife and the hostesses who’d earned his passionate affections as if this was a serious topic. Alka scowled all the while, looking as if she was forced to listen to a loud radio tuned to a station babbling about topics of no interest to her whatsoever.

As Seta’s inarguably unproductive exhortations reached their peak, Ishikura made his entrance.

He was a tall, thin man with eyes like a snake. One glint of that reptilian glare made Seta shut up immediately. The director said not a word, but Seta was soon giving excuses.

“D-Director Ishikura! I was, uh, *not* out all night! I was debating with Alka about the future of our research! Er, maybe a little of last night’s alcohol is still in me. Must be my age!”

“You’re exposing yourself,” Alka muttered.

Trapped in the serpent’s gaze, Seta braced himself for an interrogation and the lecture that was sure to follow.

Except Ishikura merely said, “Good morning” and began scanning the lobby.

It took Seta a minute to work out this was not some advanced torture technique.

“Um, Director? Something wrong?” he asked.

“Mm? I’m not sure if ‘wrong’ is the right word for it, but...Akizuki.”

“Yes?”

“Pardon the odd question, but have you seen my daughter?”

“Your daughter?” Alka looked up, surprised.

“Yes, I swung by the medical ward this morning, and she was gone. I asked the nurses, and nobody knew where she was.”

Seta slapped a fist to his palm.

“Ah,” he said. “So you thought she might have slipped out and come to the lab?”

“And since Seta was clearly out all night, there’s no use asking him.”

“Alka!” Seta wailed. “Don’t rat me out!”

“One look at you is all anyone needs,” Ishikura growled. “More importantly, my daughter?”

Clearly, they knew each other well, and scolding his subordinate for his nightclub visits was just routine. Today, though, he was a father first. His usual stoicism was nowhere to be found.

“You probably just arrived while she was in the bathroom. But she is a creature of boundless curiosity. She might have wandered off across the grounds if she’s feeling well.”

“That’s right, Director. Have some water and settle yourself down.”

Seizing the opportunity to earn himself some brownie points, Seta passed him a glass—and Ishikura downed it instantly. His nerves had left him parched.

“Thanks. I certainly hope she’s just out for a walk... Where’s Eung? Isn’t she always with you?”

“That’s not by choice. She just follows me around.” Alka finished her gloopy

coffee and looked around the lobby. “But you’re right. She’s usually already here by now, finding new ways to annoy me.”

“Hmm. I’d at least like to check if she’s seen my daughter...”

Just as they were wondering if Eung was out sick, a light bulb went off over Seta’s head.

“Oh, I actually saw her earlier!”

“Oh? Where?”

“Well, uh, I got back really late, so rather than go through the front door, I slipped in through the back—you know, just for a change of pace, and sneaked in instead.”

Awkwardly adding a rationale after the admission did not help Seta’s case, and Ishikura was rubbing his temples.

“If you start covering your tracks that late, you might as well not even bother.”

Scratching his head, Seta laughed awkwardly.

“Anyway, now that I’m close with the cleaning staff, I can just waltz in the back door without anyone stopping me.”

“And then take the passage through the lab’s staff-only underground facilities, emerging in the lobby like you’ve been here all along.”

“Alka! Just because it’s true...”

There were tears in his eyes.

Ishikura was now trying to puncture his temples with his fingers.

“Would you like a *permanent* transfer to the cleaning staff, Seta? I’m starting to think it’s a better fit for your qualifications.”

“The only thing our jobs have in common is the word ‘staff!’ Anyway, while I was walking through that passage, I heard footsteps and hid. If I bump into management and they realize I’ve been out all night, my goose is cooked.”

“Management is warming the ovens as we speak.”

“Yet I remain undaunted, Alka! There I hid, waiting for them to go away. Once the footsteps had passed, I peeked to see who it had been—and it was your lady, Eung.”

“She was in the underground passage? Whatever for?”

“That’s not all. She was with President Eva.”

“The president?! You’re sure?” Ishikura blinked.

Seta nodded emphatically.

“Yes, I caught a clear glimpse of that expensive-looking cane. She’s not in good health, but she didn’t have a single guard with her. Oh, and warn the staff if she’s coming! Even I’ve got enough sense not to go on a bender the night before her visit.”

“I’ve heard nothing about this—is it so secret they didn’t even tell me?”

“But it’s downright odd for her to be with Eung alone. If she’s following up on the results of our research, there are other division members she should be speaking to. At the very least, you’d be there, Director.”

Everyone’s frowns deepened.

“Actually, they weren’t the only people I saw,” Seta said, his memories finally catching up with him. “But could that have been...? No...”

“Who was it?”

“It didn’t make any sense, so I put it right out of my mind. But that might actually have been your daughter. I saw other employees bringing her down after I passed Eung and the president.”

“My daughter, there? Whatever for?!”

Ishikura clamped his hands down on Seta’s shoulders and shook. Seta looked quite ill.

“Urp...the Dom Pérignon’s coming back up...I mean, it made no sense! That’s why I was like, nah, it couldn’t be, and moved on! Only just remembered.”

“And the director’s daughter *is* unaccounted for.”

Which upped the odds Seta really had seen her.

An ominous silence fell, broken by the sound of Ishikura's PDA vibrating.

"Hngg...? Tony? What is it...? Yes, I'm here."

Ishikura glanced at Alka and Seta, then switched his PDA to video call mode, placing it on the table.

The screen showed a pudgy American man munching on some brightly colored jellybeans.

Blond hair, blue eyes, pale freckled skin, the dress shirt under his lab coat clearly ready to pop some buttons. From the look of his body and the fact that he was eating candy in the morning, Tony seemed like one of those guys who was always eating.

"Thanks, Director Ishikura! Oh, Alka and...Seta, you bastard. It's far too early to see that tumbleweed you call a hairdo. Go roll across Idaho."

"I've seen my share of Westerns, and I don't look like those things at all! Meanwhile, you're looking like a boss character who's one step away from blowing himself up. Maybe try a diet or two?"

"Holy shit! I'll have you know all this weight is for building muscle! Something your scrawny ass could really use. Your favorite told me she likes a man who can actually flex a bicep."

"Says a man who's never done a crunch in his life!"

"Don't ask me to do what is physically impossible."

With a belly that big, Tony might not even manage push-ups. He and Seta both had their eyes on the same cabaret girl, so this sort of bickering between them was all too common.

"Boys," Alka groaned. "Is *this* why you phoned the director?"

"Whoa, my bad. Yeah, I had a question for you—'bout your girl, Lena Eung."

"What about her?"

"Lab Chief gave her permission to comb through *all* the research results, and the upshot of that was she came busting into my division this morning. You know anything?"

They looked at each other, then shook their heads.

“As clueless as I am, huh? I figured a hard-ass like you wouldn’t let her stick her nose in our project without so much as a word of warning. So she’s acting on her own? I bet Chief Cordelia just gave permission like it wasn’t anything important. She runs this place like it’s one of her games.”

Seta leaned in closer, catching Tony’s eye.

“Tony, did they tell you President Eva’s visiting?”

“The president?! That’s news to me! A surprise inspection?”

“We were wondering about Eung’s behavior ourselves. Where was she headed?”

“That biological restoration experiment facility. Tech to conquer any disease or injury as long as you ain’t dead yet.”

“What—?”

At that moment, alarms went off across the Institute.

Ear-splitting howls that had never sounded before. Everyone around hunched over, looking for the cause.

“Wh-what? A fire?”

“That’s no fire!”

“It’s the intrusion alarm! There’s layers of security within the underground facility to ensure no one can steal this technology.”

From the PDA, Tony yelled, “Hey! Our info says someone’s breached the very back! The room controlling that device!”

A wave of panic washed over Alka. “Eung...you can’t be—!”

She broke into a run.

“Wai—Alka? Where you going?” Seta asked.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this!” She yelled over her shoulder.

She dashed across the lobby, headed for the underground facility.

The sirens were still wailing, and red lights were strobing against the walls of

the underground passage. Alka pushed past waves of evacuating lab workers, heading deeper and deeper in.

“I hope I’m worried for nothing.”

Eung had always been ambitious, and she was extra competitive with Alka.

The biological restoration project had been going nowhere, and if she was trying to force an increase in the device’s output...

Director Ishikura’s daughter had the same symptoms as President Eva.

If they ran the experiment on his daughter, and it was a success, President Eva would be next in line for the procedure—and the scientists here would be forever lauded for curing an incurable disease. *If* they succeeded.

“It’s theoretically possible.”

But this device just had too many unknowns, so even Chief Cordelia was hesitant to make adjustments. It was an unstable OOPArt—there was no telling *what* it might do.

They’d made it rain, and altered crops so they could be harvested once a month. This device could even make meteorites fall. One false move, and it might destroy the very world.

“Have you forgotten that our research is perpetually on thin ice, Eung?”

Swearing under her breath, Alka took an elevator down, down, down.

She got off so deep below the facility she could barely hear the sirens, then broke into a run.

“This is more than just a mess,” she muttered. “It’s going to give you a mountain of paperwork, and I can help you there! But even with the President backing you, the penalty for *this* will be much worse.”

Alka had almost reached her destination in the bowels of the Cordelia Research Institute...

...when she bumped her foot against something. She pulled up short and heard it roll away.

“What the—?”

She looked down, searching for the source of the noise.

“That’s—President Eva’s cane.”

Alka picked it up. A high-quality antique...

...that was now coated in blood. Bathed in the red light of the alarms, it had taken her a long moment to realize what it was.

“Huh? Blood?!”

Panic rising, Alka scanned her surroundings.

She found President Eva lying propped against the wall in a corner.

“President!”

Alka ran over to her. There was a stain spreading across her chest, blooming like a red flower. She must have taken a bullet through the heart. Her body was cold to the touch. She was long since dead.

“What...? How could this have happened?”

Ka-chnk! Clang clang!

The sound of a door opening behind Alka pulled her attention away from the president’s body. She ran toward the back, where she knew Eung must be.

Layer after layer of security shutters stood open before her.

She sprinted ahead, emerging above a deep pit.

A spiral staircase ran around the sides, but the depths were shrouded in darkness.

There was a platform suspended precariously over the abyss, covered in monitors and terminals, lights flashing ominously.

A shorter scientist was hunched over one of these, wrestling with the controls—Lena Eung.

“Argh, you idiot! These delicate adjustments are a nightmare!”

“Eung!” Alka roared, her angry voice echoing.

Eung swung around, grinning, as if she’d been waiting for this.

“Hey there, Alka! I figured you’d show. You’re right, by the way.”

She flashed her canines recklessly, not even trying to hide the truth. Alka reeled in horror.

“I really wish I wasn’t.”

“Why not? I figured you of all people would get my plan.”

Eung had already turned back to the terminal.

“I’m raising the device’s output from twenty to fifty. Not really sure the concept of output applies here, but we aren’t getting anywhere with our hands tied.”

“I didn’t think it would be *today*.”

“Things can happen quickly sometimes. And the sad truth is, you’ve gotta hustle when your sponsor lights a fire under you.”

Eung did not seem the least bit sad. Her grin made it clear she’d been aching to do this. Alka clenched her fists tightly.

“Does Chief Cordelia know about this?”

“Hmm?” Eung’s fingers never stopped tapping. “We put the request in with her directly and she agreed on the spot. Said something about scientific breakthroughs requiring sacrifice.”



“Argh, she *would*. Her motto is, ‘Give it your best shot, girl!’”

Their superior’s slapdash behavior left Alka clutching her head. That lady would have given as much thought to approving this scheme as you would give agreeing to a phone game’s privacy policy.

“But you know her! She probably figured I’d do just this. And since she rolled with it, there’s at least 50/50 odds I’ll pull it off! Even *she* won’t march blindly into death.”

“It might even eliminate the concept of dying.”

Her comment made Eung cackle. “That’s what I’m shooting for! Or wait—*your* goal lies even further out there.”

“.....”

Alka fell silent. Eung took that to mean she’d argued her down.

“I’m aiming for greater heights! No one’s managed biological restoration. Indefinite telomeres! And we’ll demonstrate it on the famous President Eva, a feat that will be regaled for eons to come! And Alka...this success will take you two or three steps closer to your goal—to Roy.”

“.....”

“Not gonna slug me and put a stop to this? I’ll take that as a go-ahead, then.”

“Argh...”

“Okay! It’s crunch time. If you’re not up to helping, at least stay quiet. Successfully developing tech to rejuvenate anything short of death will leave my name on everyone’s lips. And the subject I’m curing is the president of an emerging world power. If that doesn’t carve my name into the history books, what will?”

Anything short of death.

President Eva.

Given what Alka had just seen in the hall—

“But President Eva’s already dead!” she said.

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“And what do you plan to do by involving Director Ishikura’s daughter?”

“She’s dead?! We can’t do anything if—what’s this about his daughter?! That’s news to—ugh!”

“What’s that yelp for?!”

“D-don’t rattle me now, Alka! Huh? Why is this going—?”

Shaken by the news, Eung’s fingers slipped...

And the world went white, the light blinding Alka. That was the last thing she saw before achieving immortality.

In a room in Pyrid’s house, Kunlun Village, with her little arms crossed and her eyes screwed tightly shut, Alka was digging up memories of her time at the lab.

“Never thought it would end up like *this*.”

Outside the window stretched great blue skies and the splendor of the natural world. Dragons flitted through the gaps in the clouds—a spectacle once reserved for fantasy.

“The world, and my own body.”

Alka glanced down at the child’s frame she now inhabited, flexing her tiny hands.

“Supposedly, immortal bodies take the form associated with your most treasured memories. If I’m nine years old...then those memories are...”

“Alka...this success will take you two or three steps closer to your goal—to Roy.”

“If I’m in this body, it’s because I can’t free myself from Roy’s specter.”

Eug had seen right through that and used it against her. It was her own fault she’d failed to stop the experiment—or so she’d believed.

“But if Eve...if President Eva is the root cause, then Eug’s crazy plan must be her doing, too. That changes everything, maybe even—”

Just as Alka’s voice became more grim...

“I’m baaack! What, just you, Chief?”

...Shouma barged in. He had a nice, healthy tan, and was wearing clothes like a mountain climber. This young man worked as a courier in and around Kunlun.

His bountiful love for Lloyd had driven him to play the villain, all so that the boy could be like the hero in the novels he’d read. He’d made his share of diabolical moves.

But Lloyd had defeated him and his companion, the sinister Sou. As if his soul had been purified, his smile was bright and clear once more.

“How’s Sou doing?” he asked.

“Still sleeping.”

Her eyes turned to the white-haired man snoring on the bed.

Sou—a man Alka had made out of runes, the hero who’d saved the world.

However he, too, was immortal, unable to depart from this world. That had led him to team up with Shouma and act nefarious in the hopes of making Lloyd a hero in his stead.

When Lloyd defeated him, he’d been poised to vanish once again before realizing that with a friend like Shouma, he was not yet ready to. That conflict had sent him into a deep slumber.

“So I see.”

“One minute he’s trying to disappear, the next he’s clinging to life. He needs this time to rest. But as for you, Shouma—have a seat.”

She waved him to a chair, with all the fondness of a mother for her wayward son.

“What? More lectures? Grandpa Pyrid and Kanzo already gave me an earful. Given what I did, I suppose I’m getting off light.”

“I’m not some malicious boss who abuses my power and scolds you anew every time I remember a past failure. This is about something else.”

“What? Not trying to sever my brotherly bond with Lloyd, are you? That’s an order I’d have to refuse, even coming from you. Frankly, Chief, you’re the one

who needs to cut him loose.”

“That’s an entirely separate matter! I will never stop trying to talk sense into you there, no matter how spiteful or power-hungry you think I am!”

Both of them clearly doted on Lloyd excessively. Which naturally left them at odds. That was a big part of why Shouma had left the village and worked against Alka. Just assume they’re *both* trouble.

“So what? You want me helping with your job? Merthophan already stuck me in charge of quite a lot of farmwork, so I pretty much have my hands full. That man needs to chill.”

“No, not that. This is about Eug’s plans.”

Shouma leaned back against the chair, sighing.

“I’m pretty sure I’ve already answered this, Officer.”

“That’s what criminals always say.”

“I’m kidding! But I *have* told you what I know. Use the demon lords to plunge the world into chaos and force the nations of the world to accept the weapons she made, hastening global development...I figure you know more about that than I do. You’re her friend.”

“There was one thing I wanted to ask about again. Did you ever hear her mention anyone named Eve?”

“Eve, like the king of Profen? The loon who always wears a bunny costume?”

“I take it you weren’t aware she and Eug are in cahoots.”

“I always assumed you were her one and only friend. But I guess this lady’s as bad as you?”

“I’ll give you that one. If she really is involved... She always had a knack for manipulating people. She could wrap Eug around her finger without her ever noticing.”

That seemed to ring a bell in Shouma’s head. He stroked his chin.

“Sou was sort of like that. He started getting desperate all of a sudden, insisting we had to kill Lloyd. You thinking that’s because of Eve?”

“Maybe, but if you don’t know for sure...just watch out for her.”

Shouma nodded, and Alka stared at the floor, blaming herself.

“Eve might have led him astray, but...is Lab Chief Cordelia mixed up in this, too? If she knew this would happen, I can’t imagine why she wouldn’t have stopped Eug back then. Not that I did, either. I’m equally guilty.”

She shook those thoughts off, balling up her tiny fists.

“Running solo into the Jiou Empire and beating Eug up won’t put a stop to things. The Earth may have transformed into this vast new world, but Lab Chief Cordelia is out there somewhere. I’ve gotta track her down and learn the truth.”

“If you’re heading to Jiou, I’ll come with. I need to clean up my own mess. And if someone talked Sou into trying to kill Lloyd, I definitely wanna give them a piece of my mind.”

He was smiling, but there was a glint of anger in his eyes.

“I’ll let you know when the time comes,” Alka said.

And just like that, Shouma’s smile became bright and sunny again.

“Okay, I’d better get moving. Gotta edit all the footage we captured of Lloyd’s heroics! Wanna have it ready to show Sou when he wakes up.”

Shouma got to his feet, a hint of...passion behind his grin. Though Alka wasn’t about to let footage of Lloyd escape her attention.

“Whaaaat? You fool! You filmed all that?! I’m coming with! You’re violating the Lloyd antitrust laws for sure! I’ll be there to cuff you!”

“Man, you *are* a bad cop. Say, when are you gonna share your personal collection? I know you got one. In that crystal, right?”

“Going for the plea bargain, are you? Criminal!”

“Antitrust laws are flexible, and you know it, Chief. Or is your collection transgressing something worse? I’m still bearing a grudge about the ‘massage’ technique you taught Lloyd!”

“Oh, suuuure you are. I saw you rubbing your shoulder like you were about to ask him for one yourself! Don’t worry, my collection’s all platonic, I just don’t

wanna devalue them by sharing.”

“Same here.”

Their squabbling banished all memories of their serious conversation.

The light of grim resolve in their eyes dwarfed what had come before, but they nevertheless started sharing their collections. One would think they’d care more about the threat to the world; but as long as they were like this, Kunlun and the rest of the globe were still at peace.

The Kingdom of Azami had been on the receiving end of a curse sent by the Jiou Empire, which had forced Azami to begin prepping for war. Chrome and the other Azami military leaders had their hands full.

The academy instructors began adjusting the contents of their lectures accordingly, with major emphasis on how to coordinate the evacuation of civilians.

“Weirdly enough, those early career surveys proved helpful. We were able to split the students up based on their aptitudes and goals. If there’s a war, we’ll be ready.”

Chrome was swapping out his lesson plans with practiced ease, but Choline sighed heavily.

“War isn’t something I wanna get *used* to,” she grumbled.

At this point, Merthophan spoke up—with his duties as a Kunlun villager and Military Agricultural advisor, it had been a long time since they’d seen him in uniform, handling paperwork.

“This is an honorable engagement to protect the people from Jiou’s unjustifiable invasion. Not all conflicts are created equal, Choline.”

“You and your hard head.”

“...At the least, it’s better than the war I almost started over a personal grudge.”

“Merthophan, I—”

Once, he’d fallen victim to a demon lord’s scheme. As a result, Azami’s king

had been possessed by that demon lord, which had nearly started a war.

This had caused a lot of pain and suffering for everyone. Silence settled over the room.

“What’s all this?” Mena said, waltzing in. She’d almost certainly picked up on the mood—whether she didn’t care or was deliberately changing it was another question. “Are you all down in the dumps? What, did you go on a diet? That would do it! You should have asked me. I’d have said ‘absolutely not.’ No diets when shellfish are in season!”

“You’re in good spirits, Mena,” Choline scowled.

“My number one principle—my only one—is to *never* read the room. Not much a of party without *someone* like me around, right? That’s a secret between the two of us, Johnny.”

Chrome didn’t bat an eye.

“Can this mystery Johnny give us an update on the guild thing?”

“Yup, yup, we’re throwing a shindig in the ballroom to kick things off.”

Allow me to explain. When war breaks out, it’s vital to liaise with the guilds that keep the town moving: adventurers, merchants, and shipping. This is no less critical a task than keeping abreast of neighboring nations.

It’s no use putting up a brave fight if your supplies don’t get to you. If one general has earned a guild’s ire, they could well find themselves last in line to get the things they need. This was the first of many meetings designed to stamp out such problems before they came up.

“If things go south, we’ll need to shut the borders down, which will cause a ton of problems with freight; we’ve gotta make sure everyone’s on the same page before that happens.”

“Roll out the good booze at a fancy party, and they’ll all be saying, ‘Road closures? Gladly!’” Mena proclaimed. “It’s virtually guaranteed! Rubber stamps at the ready!”

“Virtually, huh?” Chrome said. “So where’s it gonna go wrong?”

“Can’t get anything past you, huh?” Mena chuckled, not the least bit guilty. “I

guess that was too easy. One guild is not only uncooperative, but we can't even get a response out of 'em. So here's the question: Which guild—"

"The Maritime Guild."

"Obviously the Maritime Guild."

"Who else but the Maritime Guild?"

All three spoke at once, and Mena's smile only briefly wavered.

"Not exactly a headscratcher...but yeah."

"That lot have been infamously at odds with the Azami army since forever," Choline sighed.

But what exactly did this guild do?

"We don't exactly have much ground to stand on, what with them being based around the sea."

"If they took the demon lord's possession as the king having gone mad, then the blame lies with me," Merthophan said.

"No, they've been briefed on the Abaddon incident," Chrome said.

"Yeah, this feud started before that whole thing," Choline added. "The Maritime Guild and Azami army just have it out for each other. Their guild captain was a former soldier and used to be great friends with the king, but now..."

Chrome crossed his arms.

"I've heard something went down when Coba—my predecessor on the royal guards—was a rookie, so they go way back...but the king seems reluctant to talk about it."

"Oh?" Mena raised a brow. "That man likes to talk almost as much as me!"

So she *knew* she was an incorrigible chatterbox.

But she was here about the nautical nuisance.

"I get why a guild in charge of sea routes would be a big deal, but do we really need to curry their favor like this?"

Mena was from Rokujou and had not lived in Azami long, so this was a natural question.

Chrome winced. “Yeah,” he said, glancing at Merthophan.

“Go ahead, speak your mind,” the agricultural advisor said.

“You’ve heard this kingdom’s built on trade, right?”

“Yup, and not just with Rokujou, but countries and local lords from all around. Those trade routes made this kingdom what it is! Oh...so that’s why you can’t afford to fight ’em?”

“Not just that,” Merthophan chimed in. “After I made the king get possessed by a demon lord, he grew hungry for war and plunged Azami into a recession.”

When a kingdom grew warlike without cause, trade deals died on the table.

Merthophan’s expression clouded; he was clearly blaming himself. Choline took over where he’d left off.

“As trade died, the one who kept us afloat was the leader of the Maritime Guild, Fumar Ketoshifen—Captain Fumar. His stalwart reputation single-handedly kept trade routes open, and what with the whole demon lord thing, there are lots of folks out there who would support him any day over our actual king.”

“So he’s basically the international face of Azami?”

Merthophan nodded. “He’s a pillar of our nation...so if he’s dead set against war with Jiou, many guilds will take his side.”

That actually pried Mena’s infamously heavy lids open.

“So if this was Othello, he could flip the whole dang board on us? Then we’ve really gotta get him on our side.”

“Exactly,” Chrome said, summing everything up. “If we can’t even get them to attend the ball, we’re in trouble. There’s no point in holding the thing at all without them—you might as well cancel.”

“And then we’d never get to see how bad you are at dancing!” Mena teased.

Chrome didn’t bite, but Merthophan was grinning.

“Mena, you’d be surprised. Chrome can actually bust a move.”

“Yup, he’s a really agile dancer.”

“W-we agreed not to talk about this!” Chrome protested.

“Good one,” Mena said. Then she frowned at Choline. “We *are* joking, right?”

“He got *real* drunk once, hit the dance floor, and knocked everyone dead. It was a running joke for a while. Chorus Line Chrome, they called him.”

He’d sworn never to drink *or* dance again. Even the corners of his square jaw had turned red, and he was starting to shake in anger.

Time to change the subject.

“Well, Chrome’s darkest secret aside, we definitely gotta do something about the Maritime Guild,” Choline said.

“I’ll figure something out,” Merthophan said, looking extra grim. “You’ve all got enough on your plates. I’ve got a bit more flextime.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard, Merthophan.”

“Kunlun farmwork does wonders for your endurance, Choline.”

This was said with great confidence but met with little enthusiasm. They probably couldn’t understand the relevance of farming.

“Please,” Chrome said, bowing his head. “We’ll handle contacting other guilds and getting the venue ready.”

“I’m sure you will. You’re all good at your jobs—you and your students.”

“Spare us the hot air!”

“It’s my honest opinion. The current crop of students is finer than any I was in charge of...if perhaps a bit lacking in common sense.”

That last part made everyone cringe.

The academy cadets were a cast of real characters—the sort of party you’d head into the last dungeon with.

Merthophan got to his feet, and Chrome collected his paperwork, ready to head into class.

“Ready to get that classroom hopping, Chorus Line Chrome?”

“.....”

“Wrong answer! You should have said, ‘Leave it to me to lay down a beat!’”

Mena and Choline both struck backup dancer poses, and Chrome’s scowl was a sight to behold. Nevertheless, he stalked away without a word.

Dragging his feet down the hall, he muttered, “The two of them together... No, keep your mind on the ball. Too much trouble looming to get distracted.”

He let out a very long sigh. This one wasn’t about his coworkers, but about the king.

“*Why* did he have to ask me to set things up so Princess Maria and Lloyd can dance together?”

The king wanted the pair to dance in front of all the guild leaders and VIPs, proving that the princess was safe and sound. It would also represent a public seal of approval on their relationship. This was all part of his schemes to get the princess to move back to the castle.

“And after promising he wouldn’t meddle in their relationship... Still, using Lloyd as bait to get Princess Maria to give a public appearance and reveal her identity so she can’t just keep running a shop on the East Side... It’s not his worst plan. The guy sure is desperate to get his daughter home.”

Chrome sighed heavily once again.

“Princess Maria *likes* the life she’s built for herself. Seems a shame.”

He’d seen how she lived firsthand; the princess was clearly having a great time as Marie. Drunkenly passed out on the floor, doing ablutions in the kitchen in her underwear, stuffing her face with Lloyd’s food until she puked it back up. In short, she was basically disgracing her title on a daily basis.

“.....Getting her back to the castle post-haste would probably be better for everyone, especially her Highness.”

Living disasters are rarely self-aware, and even if they catch on, extracting yourself from that life is easier said than done. It’s a direct line from the pool to the deep end, then to the bogs beyond.

Leaving the comforts of home behind was a mark of personal growth! Chrome no longer felt any pity. He looked dedicated to the cause.

Though he did feel a slight pang of guilt for dragging Lloyd into it...

Our hero was chatting with his classmates, blissfully unaware of the have-Marie-return-to-the-castle plan.

"I'm thinking it's time I become more particular about the cafeteria's coffee beans," he said.

"Excellent idea! Waking up to coffee prepared by Sir Lloyd—exquisite. Would be even better if it was prepared for me and me alone."

The girl with the heart-shaped eyes was Selen. She was prone to these, uh, romantic delusions, and came equipped with a cursed belt.

"In which case, why not just open a store on the North Side? You'd make bank, Lloyd. And could easily cover the rent and merchant guild fees."



A former mercenary with an eye for profit, Riho's mind was filled with the sound of a cash register ringing. The fact that she knew the operating expenses offhand just showed how deep her knowledge of money-making ran.

Lloyd laughed awkwardly. "My goal is to be a soldier, so opening a shop of my own isn't really in the cards."

A shadow loomed over his shoulder. ".....Mm, a new store would be too much."

Genuine concern in her voice—the always low-key martial artist, Phyllo.

"That's true. I'm only keeping up with the cafeteria work because Allan and the other crew members are pitching in. I guess improving our morning menu isn't all that practical, since I've gotta be home to make Marie's breakfast."

".....Cut her loose."

"I agree. She is *far* too dependent on you."

"It is time she learned to fend for herself!"

Unanimously harsh. Definitely more than a bit of pent-up rage at Marie hogging Lloyd to herself.

Lloyd winced and softly rejected the idea.

"No, if I leave Marie to her own devices, she'd never clean or cook. She'd be a dried-out husk in three days' time!"

All things considered, he was *equally* harsh. Most people would assume he was talking about a *pet*.

"That would prove she was never worthy."

"Humans grow through suffering."

".....She should strive for the baseline standard of human self-sufficiency."

As the pile of insults grew, in walked Allan, the son of a local lord. He shook his head.

"Do you people ever talk about anything constructive? Only Lloyd does!"

Selen wheeled around to face him.

“Oh, Allan. You certainly took your time getting here.”

“What, too busy getting showered in praise to show up on time? Waltzing in late like you own the place?”

The force of these rejoinders made the mentally weak Allan stagger.

“Yeah, the PR guy caught me...went on and on about the next plan, how he needs my help with this and that...”

“.....More free vacations disguised as inspections or rallies?”

Phyllo’s expression never changed, but she held out her hand—expecting souvenirs.

“Don’t blame me for those! But this ain’t that. It’s a way bigger headache.”

“What are they asking for?” Lloyd asked.

Allan slumped down in a chair, filling them in.

“Thing is, Lloyd, they’re getting word out to all the guilds. That involves lots of wining and dining, and I’m getting dragged along.”

The army’s PR division were promoting Allan as their new star, and he was often asked to help entertain VIPs. But eating with important people left him too stressed to taste the food.

Riho was prone to dismissing this as “bragging about free grub,” but this time she looked serious.

“But that means...”

“Right, ex-merc. War is at hand.”

That word made Selen gasp.

“War?!”

“.....With the Jiou Empire?”

Allan nodded, relaying what he’d heard.

“We caught the ringleader behind the curse thing, so we’ve gotta get our people ready before they try something else. Doesn’t sound like we’re expecting an invasion anytime soon, but we can’t afford to twiddle our thumbs,

either.”

Selen was making strange noises.

“But that means war is looming on the horizon,” she said. “We must be ready. Sir Lloyd! We must not let this conflict pry us apart! It is time we bonded—physically!”

War or not, there was only one thing on her mind.

She threw herself at Lloyd, only to be blocked by Riho and Phyllo in tandem, neither batting an eye. The group was getting *far* too used to this.

“Unhand me! You’re hindering true love!”

“It’s time you face reality, Selen.”

“.....Mm.”

As this lovelorn battle began, Chrome came in, rubbing his brow.

“Lord, you’re all *good*, but you never look it. Merthophan oughtta rephrase—they’re fine, but a fine *mess*.”

The commotion before him did rather undermine the ex-Colonel’s praise, and provoked another heavy sigh from Chrome.

“Argh, next time—”

“There is no next time,” Chrome roared. “Sit down, Selen.”

Their instructor’s presence finally forced Selen to give up the fight.

“.....Good call, ref.”

“I’m not a referee, I’m a teacher! Everyone, in your seats, can the chatter.”

Chrome looked the worse for wear.

Seeing him so clearly exhausted, Lloyd raised a hand.

“Um, Colonel Chrome, did something happen?”

“Mm? Oh, it’s just the usual. Just one thing after another.”

Lloyd’s concern brought a tear to the big man’s eye.

“Hmm... Did Colonel Choline go on another rampage?”

“No, Mena must have teased him relentlessly.”

“.....Those are both daily tribulations. He wouldn't look this tired after, either.”

The girls' off-the-cuff remarks left Chrome reeling, facing the truth of his own social standing. Tears welled up again. His heart was getting alternately warmed and ripped to pieces.

Recovering his gravitas, he began briefing the cadets on the upcoming ball.

“So this gathering isn't just about drinks and socializing, it's also meant to strengthen our ties to the guilds. You'll be helping with setup and security, so bear that in mind.”

He left out the part about the threat of war, but every cadet here knew exactly *why* they'd need to work closely with the guilds, and the air grew tense.

“Everyone invited will be important, so whether you're tasked with security or serving drinks, be on your best behavior. Lots of guild roles are filled by ex-soldiers, so assume they'll be holding you to the highest standards.”

“.....So watch out for alumni?”

Phyllo got straight to the point. Chrome winced.

“Basically, yes. You might end up working for them if you make a name for yourselves, so do your best not to upset your prospective employers.” Chrome flashed a grin, then added, “Raising soldiers skilled enough to land good post-military careers is a feather in my cap, too. There are people out there who have founded new guilds, or people like the previous head of the royal guard, Cobra, who now owns a hotel.”

“Oh? New guilds, huh? First I've heard of it.” Riho usually sat through class with her chin on her hand, but today she was eagerly leaning forward.

“Hasn't happened in a while, and both were pretty special cases, but to my knowledge, both the Maritime and Adventurer Guilds are examples.”

“Oh? The Adventurer Guild?”

“Gathered all the roustabouts and stopped them from turning on each other. Loads of people owe the guild master a debt, inside and outside the

organization. They're a pretty tight-knit group... Uh, back to the point." Chrome cleared his throat, correcting course. "Long and short of it is, lots of guests this time have *history*, and plenty of these guilds are even stricter than the army. It won't hurt to make a good impression, Riho Flavin. And it *will* hurt if you make a bad one."

She shot him her best "I ain't that sloppy" grin.

"But we can't all be like Allan and work the crowd the whole time. Let's keep our focus on the job, everyone."

Selen said this just to mess with Allan, so her classmates laughed, agreeing.

"It's not like I wanna do it! It's my job...a really weird job..."

Allan's voice got smaller and smaller, until it got swallowed by the noise of the room. He was only too aware his reputation was undeserved.

"A ball...", Lloyd whispered. "I know a lot about how to make parties go smoothly."

He had some confidence in his customer service skills and working security. He was ready to take on either option.

When homeroom ended, Lloyd got up eagerly and saw Chrome beckoning him over.

"Uh, Lloyd. A moment?"

"Yes, sir."

Wondering if he'd be asked to work the kitchens during the ball, he joined Chrome in the hall.

"Sorry to spring this on you."

"Not at all. What's up? Need kitchen staff for the ball? I'm available."

"I appreciate the offer, but it's not that, no."

Chrome glanced around, making sure no one—especially Lloyd's friends—was listening. He didn't want them hearing about the princess.

"You remember the king talking about the princess? How she had feelings for you?"

“Uh, yeah.”

Lloyd started looking anxious. Poor boy. Affection from a woman he’d never met, and royalty to boot? That was enough to fray anyone’s nerves.

Chrome sympathized and awkwardly scratched his cheek.

“So the king wants you to dance with her at this ball. His goal is to use the occasion to prove to everyone her Highness is alive and well. I’d appreciate you acting as her partner—but that doesn’t mean you’re agreeing to date her, so don’t stress about it too much.”

Chrome bowed low, which just made Lloyd even more nervous.

“P-please, Colonel, don’t do that! I-I’ll be fine.”

“Sorry, Lloyd.”

Chrome was well aware Lloyd was too nice to refuse someone bowing, and he’d taken advantage of that. He was apologizing on *both* counts.

Lloyd scratched his head and sighed.

“I can do it,” he said. “But is there anything you can tell me about the princess? I’d much rather meet her before the big day.”

That made Chrome clam up. He probably should have just told Lloyd that Marie was the princess and that they were already living together, but he felt that should really come from her. Though given how she usually acted, Lloyd might well not believe him. That sounded like a nightmare Chrome wanted no part of. It would definitely be for the best if he foisted it on Marie.

“That I can’t say. Sorry.”

“O-oh...”

“If you get the opportunity, maybe talk to Marie. She knows a lot.”

“I could...but last time I asked if she knew where the princess was, she said, ‘I *am* the princess,’ clearly joking to get out of answering.”

Ah. She *had* tried. In vain. Chrome was both taken aback and genuinely horrified that she’d been unable to convince him.

“She really needs to get her act together... Welp, thanks, Lloyd. You’re saving

my ass here.”

Chrome bowed again, and headed toward the office.

Lloyd was left at a loss.

“A dance at a ball... I had hoped to get a chance to turn her down before it became a huge thing, but...there’s no way I’m worthy of royalty.”

He hung his head...but soon made up his mind.

“Well, that settles it. I have to find her and turn her down *before* the ball.”

He took a deep breath and slapped his cheeks.

“But I’ve gotta keep this a secret from everyone else—don’t want word getting out that I rejected her! This won’t be easy, but I’ve gotta try! I wonder what she’s like?”

He suddenly remembered Marie winking and telling him *she* was the princess, and laughed.

“She’s *definitely* nothing like Marie!”

She was actually *exactly* like Marie.

But the ball had lit a fire under Lloyd’s search for the princess, leading to a web of romance and misunderstandings. If only he knew.

Chapter 1

Lloyd Logic: Like a Dumb Detective Determining the Culprit Through Circumstantial Evidence and Personal Bias Alone

Outside the Azami Diplomatic Offices.

What appeared to be a luxury hotel in the Central District was actually where the Azami Military conducted negotiations with VIPs from foreign nations and housed them during their stay.

It provided the utmost in opulent comfort, the finest dining possible, rest areas to suit the cultural needs of the world, and every amenity one could hope for. No matter what their guests needed, it was on hand.

Inside, one entire floor was occupied by a dance hall, and this was where the ball would be held. Soldiers were already present, starting the preparations.

They were cleaning a large chandelier so expensive that if dropped, it would cost them their lives—literally and financially. Setting and maintaining magic stones with a glow so pure you could tell no one had cared a whit for the fuel economy. Removing stains from a carpet with an insane knot density. The physical labor of the task paled in comparison to the mental toll, and everyone looked stressed.

Lloyd and the cadets were helping with relatively simple tasks—mopping the halls and wiping the windows, et cetera. If they were to let Phyllo anywhere near that chandelier, glass would start raining down, and Chrome had clearly accounted for that.

Once they finished their cleaning duties, Lloyd—the class leader—began explaining everyone's roles on the day of the ball.

“Um, so Riho, you're good at magic, so you'll be on exterior patrols. Phyllo's good with bare-handed combat, so you'll be passing out drinks on the floor, ready to act as security if the need arises. Same for you, Selen.”

He was getting more comfortable with tasks like this. Between the curse incident and the military festival, he'd gained some much-needed confidence, and the instructions flowed smoothly.

"Ahhh..." Selen moaned, looking ecstatic.

She was clearly etching every second of it into her brain. While also captioning the images with "My boyfriend is such a capable person." (Note: They were still nothing more than classmates.) ".....Selen.....drool."

"Gasp! How shameless of me."

She puffed up her cheeks as if they were stuffed with lemons and pickled plums.

Phyllo just glared at her. Usually she was the one getting scolded, so Riho wasn't about to let that pass without making a comment.

"My, my! Selen, letting Phyllo scold *you*? That's no good."

".....I resent that implication."

Phyllo furrowed her brows, and Riho slapped her shoulder.

"Sorry, sorry," she said. "Heh, just not something you see every day, so I couldn't help myself. But I don't blame Selen for staring. The way Lloyd acted in the beginning, you'd never imagine him taking charge like this."

"He was always wonderful, but he has become even more so. Still..."

Selen folded her arms, concerned.

"He has something on his mind. I keep catching him looking worried."

".....And it's not *your* fault?"

"Bet it is."

Their remarks so snappy they were delivered within a second.

While it was entirely reasonable to assume the boy would feel agitated under Selen's constant supervision, the belt princess found that accusation infuriating.

"I swear this is *not* about me! My father has already accepted him, and nothing remains in our way that could possibly prevent our marriage."

Stalking someone in the hopes of marrying them was still a concept that left the others tongue-tied. Paying no heed to the heavy silence, Selen proceeded to elaborate upon her theory.

“The look on his face is clear! Some strange woman has designs on him, and he doesn’t know what to do!”

“Welp, there’s your answer.”

“.....She doesn’t know it’s her. And doesn’t want to think it’s her. She can’t admit she’s that dumb.”

Selen’s stalking skills were nationally recognized, but it was a real feat to read Lloyd’s expressions with such precision and yet never connect that to her own behavior.

“I can see it on his face! ‘How can I turn her down? I already have Selen!’”

“You’ll be like this your whole—mm?”

Riho’s attention was drawn to the commotion across the room.

“.....The king.....and the top diplomat.”

Two very important men were here for an inspection. Every soldier in the area stopped what they were doing, straightened their backs, and saluted.

“Everyone’s working hard! Great to see.”

“Don’t be too quick to drop what you’re doing just because His Majesty is here. The guild leaders are important, but not so important we want you hurting yourselves. Take all the necessary precautions, please. Oh!”

At this juncture, both men spotted Lloyd, and approached him, smiling. The military festival had made him their favorite cadet.

“Lloyd! You’re holding up okay?”

“I am, Your Majesty.”

Lloyd looked a bit stiff, so the diplomat started rubbing the boy’s shoulders.

“You and your cadets will be vital to the security of this ball. We’ve got plenty of veterans where it counts, but we’re also sending a message to the guilds that our next generation is being taught well. And this will be a valuable experience

for all of you!”

“Yes, sir! We’ll do our best!”

So that’s Lloyd?

Wow, he’s talking to the king and the head diplomat like it’s nothing!

He looks so cute, but I hear he’s actually really skilled.

The attention Lloyd received from the two VIPs earned him envious looks. But he was far too stressed to notice.

They left Lloyd, speaking to each soldier in turn.

Seeming a bit nervous herself, Riho asked, “Your Majesty, if we’re holding a party for guild leaders, does that mean war is seriously at our door?”

“Ah...Riho, was it? The idea is to prepare our people so that if that day comes, we aren’t in a mad scramble. Whether the worst happens or not, it never hurts to improve relationships.”

That brought a relieved smile to her lips.

“You aren’t a fan of war, I take it?” the king asked.

“Yeah...I was orphaned because of one, after all. They’re best averted whenever possible.”

They’d kept their voices low, and the king soon moved on, offering words of encouragement to the other cadets present.

Once he and the diplomat were gone, Lloyd went back to checking the security plans.

“Make sure you’re aware what time your shifts end and where the break rooms are. Mm? What’s wrong, Selen?”

“I just realized I don’t see Allan anywhere. He’s usually here showing off his smug face.”

Riho scanned the room. “Yeah, he’s not here. Is he playing hooky?”

Phyllo nudged her. “.....Over there.”

She was pointing...up.



“The chandelier is good to go! Wow, the latest luminescent magic stones sure do shine different! Such pure light! And they even *feel* smoother!”

Allan had some sort of safety helmet on, and was at the top of a ladder, rubbing a magic stone on his cheek. Objectively creepy behavior.

“Oh! Allan...”

Even Lloyd couldn’t find any excuses to save Allan this time.

“Riiight, he got obsessed with lighting from that film shoot in Rokujou,” Riho spat.

“I think it’s a fine hobby!”

“.....Then why won’t you look at him?”

Selen was just shy of shielding her eyes with one hand. She and Allan were both children of local lords, and she did *not* want to be associated with him on a personal level.

Allan smoothly climbed down the ladder, and slapped his fellow illumination crew members on their backs. It appeared he was their leader.

“We’ve gotta make these guild leaders shine bright! Minimal shadows, classy three-point lighting! Stay safe, everyone!”

After giving a speech a foreman would say, Allan saluted. Then he spotted Lloyd and the girls, and approached them.

“Lloyd! And company.”

“Guess we’d better scope out our posts.”

“.....Mm.”

“I agree!”

Not wanting anyone to think they knew each other, the girls swiftly fled.

Lloyd was left behind, looking extremely uncomfortable.

“Hmph,” Allan said. “Welp, glad they’re taking the job seriously!”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

He was *still* rubbing the magic stone against his cheeks, so Lloyd's laugh was extra hollow.

"Actually, this is ideal, Lloyd! Now that we're alone—"

"Oh, don't mind me. I'd rather not."

Fearing that he was being recruited to the lighting team, Lloyd started backing away.

This just baffled Allan.

"What's gotten into you?" he said, tilting his head. "You're the one who asked me to find out more about the princess."

"Oh! This is about that?"

When Lloyd had first learned the princess had feelings for him, he'd talked to Allan about it in the hopes that he might have an occasion to obtain information about her from the king. He'd just forgotten all about that in light of Allan's fake foreman act.

"I dunno what else it would be... Are you wearing yourself out, Lloyd?"

He unscrewed a light fixture *and* put a spin on Lloyd's response.

"So..." He glanced around once more, making sure none of the girls could hear. "The king says she's quite a beauty."

"She is...?"

Definitely a biased opinion. Every dad thinks their daughters are the cutest.

"And it sounds like she has a bit of a foul mouth, but is a sweet girl deep down."

"Mean on the outside, nice on the inside?"

Basically how every teenage girl treats their dad, seen through rosy spectacles.

"And she has a lot of mana and is good at magic."

"Magic, really?"

She'd mastered a rune, so it was technically a strong point, sure.

But definitely all filtered through the perspective of a loving parent. Thus utterly lacking in any concrete information, Lloyd was left at a loss.

“Sorry, I know. Just all doting dad stuff. Wish I could have asked where she was, but once he got started boasting...”

“N-no, anything helps. Thanks, Allan.”

“Anything for you, Lloyd! If I get another shot, I’ll try and pry her location out of His Majesty. Oh! Hey! The lighting’s dim on the left there, what are you even doing?!”

“Ah-ha-ha...”

He’d gone back to veteran foreman mode, barking orders to his lighting crew.

Lloyd put that out of his mind, and sorted through this new information.

“Beautiful, sharp-tongued, kind-hearted, good at magic...”

Those were mostly personal traits, and far too general. They left Lloyd with his arms crossed and a frown on his face.

If he just knew where she was, he could head on over and decline the dance. Lloyd had been desperately hoping he could find a hint somewhere in Allan’s intel. He was one of those people who are *so* nice they want to make use of someone else’s efforts even if they weren’t actually helpful.

“She *was* missing, but the search was called off about the time I enrolled. Seems safe to assume that’s when they found her.”

“Yeah, the search just sort of stopped. While we were all too busy to notice. Then Colonel Chrome came back to work and put us through our paces—seems like ages ago,” Allan recalled.

As they drifted into reverie, a haughty voice rang out.

“Honestly, Lloyd Belladonna! Just when I think you’re starting to get your act together, you stop to blather.”

Her attitude as overbearing as her boobs, the head of the second years, Micona Zol, made her entrance. She was starry-eyed over Marie, and the fact that Lloyd was living in Marie’s shop made her hate him more than anyone else

alive. She'd taken to repeating "That should be me!" like a mantra or a curse.

Lately, she'd started to tone that down a little; as Lloyd grew more confident, she'd been forced to recognize his achievements, and shouting her mantra went from being a daily occurrence to an every-other-day thing. She was making progress! Incrementally.

Allan argued back, using the light fixture as a metaphor.

"Micona, Lloyd's doing his job right. Like the unwavering, gentle shine of this year's luminescent stones. I'm also doing my part to light the path for Azami's future, adjusting angles, reducing shadows, using the ceiling—"

"Yeah, yeah, take your love of lighting and tell it to the wall."

"Don't be absurd! Walls care not for my voice, only for how the lights bounce from them! They, too, must be adjusted to the right lumens! All for Lloyd's moment of glory! I mean, he and the princess—"

"Um, Allan."

That was not something to let slip.

"Whoops, never mind!"

Allan clapped his hand over his mouth, but Micona was not one to miss the obvious.

"What's this? Explain yourself. Glory? More favoritism, Lloyd Belladonna? Doing a whole 'oops, that was a secret' act and making me pry further just to see how superior you are and rub my nose in it?"

That was being more than a bit paranoid.

"Uh, no...that wasn't why..."

"Then spit it out. If it isn't important, there's no reason to hide it."

Micona was effectively baiting him into confessing here. Lloyd was left with no other choice. She was just that much better at this sort of thing.

Lloyd looked troubled, and Allan winced and apologized.

"This one's on me, Lloyd," Allan said, lifting up his shirt. "I'll just be over there, committing ritual suicide."

“Th-that’s not necessary! I-I guess it won’t hurt if Micona knows.”

Lloyd gave up the fight, and told Micona what lay in store.

“Please keep this to yourself—”

The princess had a thing for Lloyd and wanted to dance with him at the ball. Micona looked annoyed at first, but when she heard about the princess’s feelings, a light bulb went off, and she began hanging onto every word.

If the princess loved Lloyd, then the dance could lead to courtship, and courtship to marriage...

Micona’s heart was already screaming, *My chance to pry Marie from his clutches!*

All the gears in her head had gone into overdrive, and the moment she reached that conclusion, she started pumping her fist.

Seeing her overflowing with joy and merrily waving her fist around, Lloyd and Allan looked baffled.

“Heh-heh-heh...royal privilege will force Lloyd Belladonna to court this princess! You’ll have to leave that shop behind so I can slip on in!”

Micona wasn’t stopping at making gestures, she was literally explaining her plans—in a whisper they couldn’t quite make out, but one that was nonetheless alarming.

You don’t just slip into an open bed in a shop’s back room like celebrities vying to host a late-night show. But to Micona, this was wonderful news, and she was already looking up, muttering, “Just you wait, Marie!” (But that girl is still on earth with us...) There was just one problem: as you all know, this princess *was* her beloved Marie. Blissfully unaware of the upcoming punch line, Micona took Lloyd’s hand, nodding vigorously.

“A beautiful opportunity, Lloyd Belladonna. You have the full support of Micona Zol, head of the second-years. If there’s anything I can do to help, just let me know.”

The more enthusiastic she got, the more apologetic Lloyd looked.

“I appreciate it...but I’m just not a suitable match for, um...”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Public opinion will decide *that*—it has no bearing on your personal feelings. Going against the world is just romantic! You’re a soldier, you should know that.”

Ignoring how his occupation was irrelevant, Micona was desperate to hook them up.

“Hang on, Micona.” Allan waved his hands, trying to calm her down. “Right now we’re just trying to figure out what this princess is like.”

“Oh? You’ve never even seen her? I can see how that would make you hesitant.”

She nodded.

“Yes, no matter who she is, if you’ve only met on the big day, you’ll be too nervous to dance well. And tripping over your feet will ruin your chance with her! We can’t have that. If you know what she looks like, you’re as good as married!”

Missing several steps there; try not to abbreviate that hard.

“Micona, you sound like Selen!” Allan hissed, but she paid him no heed.

Instead, she gave Lloyd a hearty slap on the shoulder, and a thumbs-up.

“Never fear, Lloyd Belladonna! No matter who she is, no matter where, I’ll find her! No time like the present!”

With that burst of confidence, she was gone like the wind. Completely abandoning her actual job. Even though this whole thing had started with her scolding Lloyd for just that.

“Uh, wai—”

Lloyd and Allan had a new collaborator—or possibly just a troublemaker—on their side, but for now Lloyd finished up his duties and wondered what to do next.

“After all the monster mayhem, they stopped asking us to look for the princess. The king also made it sound as if he sees her every now and then. She must be in the kingdom or close to it. Safe and secure, with someone the king trusts watching over her? And she’s good at magic...sharp-tongued, nice deep

down...hmm..."

That all sounded like someone he knew.

"Is the princess...Riho?"

Riho Flavin—a war orphan from Rokujou, her lineage unknown. Her magic skills were so advanced, she'd actually won a magic tournament.

She could speak quite harshly, but had a good heart, so she *did* sort of match the description. One could see why she'd be on his list of suspects.

"That's right, Riho said she was an orphan and never knew her parents. But she only found out she was royalty after enlisting! That's why they called off the search around the time I joined."

Human brains are strange things. If even one part of a theory fits, we'll try and cram in the rest, no matter how tight a squeeze. Coupled with Lloyd's need to put Allan's intel to good use—well, it was all leading him wildly astray.

"But if Riho's the princess...then she's in love with me?!"

Lloyd turned bright red. Did that mean she had a chance? This didn't seem like it would end well. If Selen got involved, it might literally end in bloodshed.

But as for Marie—despite the obvious magic skills, she wasn't even considered a possible candidate. Living together sure lets you see someone's faults and foibles. Which definitely ruled out the possibility of her being the princess.

Lloyd had sown seeds of chaos like a sumo wrestler throwing salt before their match. Soon, they would soon begin to bloom.

Like the day before, classes at the academy wrapped up in the morning, and the cadets were sent to help prep for the ball. Managing and cleaning the venue, and distributing invites to the guilds involved.

Lloyd's group left the Central District, and headed for the North Side.

"Why do we gotta hit up the guilds, Allan?"

Riho was clearly feeling out of sorts.

"Colonel Chrome said why! They wanted Lloyd, me, and our friends to visit in

person.”

A guild had specifically requested that their party deliver the invites, but which was it?

“If I’m with Sir Lloyd, I can go anywhere. He’s my future husband!”

“.....Riho, if you’re *not* his friend, you can go straight home.”

“Wha—Phyllo, you didn’t have to say it like that!”

Riho was prone to loneliness and always hated feeling left out. Phyllo had used that against her, and she quickly started acting suspiciously.

Lloyd was watching this, hand on his chin, thinking hard.

“Definitely fits the description...”

He seemed to fall deeper into that thinking.

“Which guild asked for us, anyway?”

“.....Is it one of the bad ones?”

Allan held up the envelope.

“Uh, yeah. The Adventurer Guild.”

“Ugh, them? They’re the worst.”

“How careful do we need to be?” Lloyd asked.

“Very,” Allan said, nodding grimly. “There’s a reason Colonel Chrome was cowering when he tasked us with this.”

“Really? And people this dangerous want to meet us?”

Lloyd looked nervous, but Selen looked on the bright side like usual.

“I’m sure they just wanted a glimpse of the academy’s star couple, myself and Sir Lloyd. We simply must give our autographs if they ask for them, Lloyd—right here on this marriage application.”

She was looking on the bright side...or rather concocting a scam, which Riho and Phyllo soon chewed her out for. Caught red-handed!

They continued down the North Side road. This area was mostly tourist traps,

souvenir shops, and luxury vendors, but it also housed the public faces of the biggest guilds.

Riho naturally knew more about the area than anyone else, so she took the lead, giving them an explanation. She'd done odd jobs for several of these guilds. Technically, so had Phyllo, but she'd left the negotiating to her sister, Mena. Meanwhile, Selen and Allan were both nobility, and Lloyd had never dared.

"The Adventurer Guild members were a big help when I was getting outta Rokujou. They have plenty of work for ex-mercs and soldiers if you can handle yourself. They have branches in every nation, but the head office is in Azami. Work ranges from guard shifts to monster exterminations—all kinds of stuff, really. They're so much bigger than the other guilds that most people think of 'em when they hear the word."

".....I sure did." Phyllo said.

"Selen and Lloyd are one thing, but you really should know better. Second biggest is the merchant guild—that building over there."

Riho pointed to a large building that looked like a trading company.

"Really? I just assumed those were regular offices."

"If you wanna open a shop anywhere in Azami, you need the approval from that guild and the army. They also monitor hygiene for the mass of food stalls on the South Side. Pay their fee, and they help with a lot. Can't afford the fee, you'll end up on the East Side with all those sketchy shops."

"Fascinating! That will be good to know if Lloyd and I ever decide to open a mom-and-pop shop."

Selen was daydreaming again, but Phyllo softly growled, ".....He wants to be a soldier, though."

Oblivious to his burgeoning mercantile career, Lloyd fixed his eyes on Riho.

She might really be the princess...

Foul-mouthed, secretly kind, good at magic, origins unknown... And if the king had spotted her after her arrival in Azami, the timing worked out, too.

The list of clues was piling up, and Lloyd had strayed further from the truth. A night's sleep has a way of turning idle conjecture into confirmed fact, and now he couldn't stop thinking otherwise.

She struggled with the mercenary life. And that makes her hate to admit her true rank...

Now he was adding sympathy to the cocktail. With all she'd been through, if she had a crush on him...

Well, basically everybody but Lloyd thought her crush on him was obvious (※Riho herself still denied it) so that much was true, just...not the whole princess thing.

Selen picked up on his stare.

"Lloyd, why are your eyes only on Riho?"

There was an ominous note to her voice that kicked Lloyd's guilt into overdrive.

"Oh, n-no reason..., " he squeaked.

His evasive response did not pass unnoticed by Phyllo's sharp eyes. Top martial artists knew how to read the subtlest of signs.

".....What's going on, Master?"

Her voice was sweet, but intimidating. A bead of sweat ran down Lloyd's brow.

Riho was in love with him, and the king was playing matchmaker; Lloyd trusted Selen and Phyllo, but he couldn't exactly blurt out her secrets, especially with the princess listening! A wise decision—mentioning *any* of that would definitely result in a bloodbath.

"Um, I-I just..." He racked his brain for something plausible. "I just was impressed by how much Riho knows."

This sudden compliment definitely rattled the recipient.

"That sweet talk ain't gonna get you nowhere with me, buster," she managed, awkwardly scratching her cheek.

Desperate to worm his way out of this, Lloyd kept heaping on the praise.

“No, no! I really respect it. Knowledge is a wonderful thing!”

“Th-thanks, I guess.”

Selen was not about to stand idly by while they shared a moment. She stepped up, fishing for compliments of her own.

“I know things, too! You know why banks have potted plants by the entrance? They use those to help estimate the heights of bank robbers!”

This FYI was clearly unrelated to anything that had come before, but Lloyd had to react positively anyway.

“R-really? You sure are well informed.”

Selen looked extremely proud of herself, and this ignited Phyllo’s competitive spirit.

“.....Master,” she said, dead serious.

“Y-Yes?”

“.....Birds.....can fly.”

“Um. That’s right.”

This was maybe the first time Phyllo had ever attempted to demonstrate knowledge. This conversation had perhaps looped back around to *philosophy*, which made Lloyd rather confused.

In an attempt to help him, Allan said, “Geez, I know you all crave his affections but bombarding him with pointless facts is not a good look.”

“I-I wasn’t, asshole!” Riho snapped.

“This, coming from a man who knows literally nothing.”

“.....I bet that’s *why* he’s upset.”

“Big talk from someone who barely knows birds can fly! Oh, look, we’re here.”

While they argued, they’d reached the Adventurer Guild.

“So this is their headquarters?”

One step off the North Side's main street, this road was often called Back of the North. It had an underground vibe—almost as if they were on the East Side.

There were still plenty of tourists, but also more than a few bruisers. The mishmash of people definitely gave the street a *vibe*.

The shops here were not exactly selling souvenirs. Instead, it was mainly weapons and armor—not the sort of thing you'd wanna bring back through customs.

"This place is pretty grim. One street over, and it's all hustle and bustle."

Every city has a place only locals visit just a block away from streets teeming with foreign tourists.

This was Lloyd's first time off the beaten path on the North Side, so he was still soaking it in.

"This is pretty typical," Riho chuckled. "Every city's underworld is closer to their popular spots than you'd think. And stuff off the beaten path has its own appeal, which is why there are tourists here, too. Maybe a bit too stimulating for closeted nobility, eh, Selen?"

"My! Those high-spec binoculars have dropped in price again!"

"Hey, Selen, welcome back! We got an upgraded product, so the old model's on sale. These are the new ones if you're interested."

"Hmm, those are impressive, but I don't see myself buying them until they're a little better with night vision. Reducing the size at the cost of visual clarity just defies the purpose."

"Sign of the times, I'm afraid. If you're posted to a stakeout or monitor role, you care more about portability and ease of concealment than you do about seeing everything."

"I would say the owner's skill should compensate, but...well, the demand will eventually come back around. I'll just have to hope visual fidelity becomes the next big thing."

"Sure thing. If you need any more bottle bombs, just lemme know!"

".....A stimulatingly professional interaction."

“I forgot. She was Selen long before she was nobility.”

This glimpse of Selen’s dark side left them all stunned. Allan was the first to recover from the shock and turn back to the guild building.

“But why would they ask for me and Lloyd?”

“Have you met Adventurer Guild staff before, Allan?”

“Yeah, when they visited the castle. I happened to be there, and greeted them.”

“I’ve done jobs and cashed in, but never been past the first floor lobby,” Riho said. “I’ve never seen the guild master. What are they like?”

“I haven’t met them either. Supposedly the guild master hasn’t been seen in years, and Katsu Kondou’s been serving as their proxy the whole time.”

“.....We’d better go in before Selen buys anything.”

She already had something very suspicious in hand, and was whispering “You do good work” to it. Phyllo quickly dragged her indoors.

Inside, a stony-faced man was at the desk, every bit the image of a guard. But when they told him they were sent by the Azami army, he said, “This way,” and led them further in.

He took them up a long flight of stairs to the top floor, opening a faded door to a vast chamber. It wasn’t so much a room as a training ground, really.

The bare wooden floor was at best weathered, but evidently no one had even bothered waxing it in years. People had also clearly punched holes in it, and those gaps had been patched using whatever wood they had on hand, without any attempt to match the color or grain.

The walls were lined not with decor or potted plants, but with wooden swords and shields, and well-used armor. Clearly, this place had once been used for hardcore combat practice.

Arranged like a line of furniture, a row of fierce-looking adventurers stood before them. They flanked a man in his forties or fifties—presumably the proxy guild master.

In one corner, there were couches and desks, like a regular office, and the proxy guild master wore a suit that was not very adventurer-like.

His appearance might have been that of an office drone, but his aura said otherwise. With these burly fighters around him, he looked like one of those *smart* gangsters. They'd all been expecting a muscular warrior and looked rather taken aback.

"I do apologize for asking you to come all the way here. Please, have a seat."

His kind manner in no way made him less intimidating. They nervously took a seat, all too aware the men on either side were evaluating them. Lloyd was so nervous he perched on the edge of his seat as if he were at a job interview.

One of the stone-faced men offered them tea, and as they took a sip, the proxy master spoke again.

"The name's Katsu Kondou. The guild master is currently away, and I'm filling in for her."

He then answered the question on everyone's minds.

"Wondering why a regular Joe like me is running a guild of roustabouts and thugs?"

".....Mm." Phyllo nodded while drinking her tea.

"By all rights, the Adventurer Guild would be run by the strongest one among us. But that person is a rather free spirit, and she forced this role upon me and vanished into the wind."

He shook his head. Very much the put-upon businessman, but the look on his face made it clear he adored her.

"You don't know where she went?"

"No, and it's been over a decade."

"That long...?!"

That was far longer than they'd imagined.

Katsu seemed used to that reaction, and it didn't break his stride.

"Most people are shocked to hear it, but...just imagine her as the type of

woman who would totally be away that long without thinking anything of it.”

He shifted in his chair, making it creak. His eyes narrowed.

“Like I said, the guild tends to attract...rough and rowdy people. It’s a meritocracy in a suit of armor, heavily armed. With the guild master gone, plenty of people have their eyes on her position. So far, the old guard—anyone who knew of her strength—have driven them away.”

The row of men behind him nodded.

“With a company like that under her thumb, she must have been something else,” Riho said.

“You can say that again,” Katsu admitted. “Before the guild existed, there were a bunch of clans, teams, and gangs, all doing whatever they pleased. She brought them all together.”

“I heard as much. She founded the Adventurer Guild to unite them, and those involved still follow her to this day.”

Katsu looked proud, and then ashamed of that feeling.

“Without her, most of the old guard would have died in a ditch somewhere. Many of them essentially swore undying loyalty to her.”

The smile faded from his lips. Seeing that he was about to get straight to the point, everyone braced themselves.

“We can’t let things fall apart. We’re duty-bound to keep this guild together. Have I made that clear?”

“.....Your passion is most convincing.”

Katsu’s eyes swept the party, as if they already knew what came next.

“To stave off would-be mutineers, those of us at the top need to prove ourselves. Strength engenders trust and maintains reputations.”

“I get why that’s important, but not how that ties into our...reception,” Riho said, scanning the tense faces behind the proxy master.

“Or why you asked for us by name,” Allan added.

“The possibility of war with Jiou is only too real,” Katsu said. “We’ll have to

work closely with the army—which means fighting alongside you.”

“Is something about the arrangement bothering you? I’m sure the top brass can—”

Before Lloyd could say any more, Katsu pointed right at him.

“Our problem is *you*, Lloyd Belladonna.”

“M-me?”

“Yes.” Katsu nodded, folding his arms. “We’re concerned about the Azami army’s blatant PR positioning—forcing easily-understood heroes onto the public. If we don’t address that issue, our rank and file will think we’re falling for their propaganda, or deliberately perpetuating it.”

He leaned back in his chair, sighing.

“Like I said, we’re the Adventurer Guild. Mercenaries, essentially. Reputation and trust are everything, and no one is willing to risk their life and fortune on someone who buys into exaggerated propaganda.”

Riho jabbed Allan with her elbow.

“Yo, Allan, they’re talking about you. The army’s new hope—the Dragon Slayer.”

“M-me? Well, sure, they’re definitely overhyping me. A lot.”

Katsu glanced their way.

“Someone like Allan is...tolerable. Barely. He did well for himself in that exhibition match with Jiou. Showed indomitable spirit and kept fighting against an opponent who outmatched him. That’s a form of strength, and anyone who was there would be willing to put their faith in him. Enough to overlook a bit of hyperbole.”

Allan was unsure what to do with that praise, and wound up just sheepishly scratching his head.

“So what’s the issue?” Selen asked.

Katsu picked up a document from his desk as he answered.

“But that success seems to have gone to their heads. The Azami army are now

prioritizing pretty faces, and pushing this boy—see here.”

He laid out the hand-washing promotion poster featuring Lloyd dressed as a nurse.

A priceless artifact (LOL), the mere sight of which could bolster the entire immune system in folks of a certain persuasion.

“Oh, no...”

“And as if this wasn’t bad enough, they’re starting rumors that he defeated a golem with a single punch, cleared away a roadblock all by himself, and can fly...”

Katsu’s frown was growing deeper. But all of these things were *true*.

“Allan’s success has emboldened them, and they’re peddling outright lies. We cannot be a part of this. Advertising a failed product like it’s a massive success is deceptive, and damages the reputation of the entire organization so even their good products cease to sell. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“You think Lloyd is weak, then?” Selen asked, her glare every bit as intimidating as Katsu’s.

However, he did not back down. “The part about flying is clearly ridiculous.”

The look on Lloyd’s face screamed, “Huh? But I *can* fly!” But he had not yet worked out how inherently absurd that was.

Sensing that Selen was about to explode, Riho took over.

“So? You want to test him yourselves? Is that what this room’s for?”

“If what the Azami army says is true, we have no problem. We’ve heard stories about each of you and would love to see your skills for ourselves. Or are you afraid of a little violence?”

Phyllo twisted her impassive face into a smile. “.....I love it.”

Katsu grinned back. He wasn’t in this guild for nothing.

But one girl here wasn’t smiling.

“Still, you’re the Adventurer Guild,” Riho said. “That’s not really your style.”

She was in full negotiator mode now.

“Meaning?” Katsu asked, his smile fading.

Riho grinned. “Your organization hires adventurers, gives them quests, and ranks them based on the number of completed quests and their difficulty.”

“We do. What about it?”

“So instead of a boring old fight, why not test us with a quest? Doesn’t matter how hard it is, our Lloyd’ll take care of it. You’ll get a tough one or perhaps two off your list, and it’ll be good for both of us.”

That all sounded perfectly logical. Yet her friends (well, not Lloyd) could see exactly where she was going with this. *Oh, she’s making Lloyd do a quest for her and pocketing a share of the reward.*

“Hmm,” Katsu said, thinking this over.

Riho leaned in, heedless of her friends. “Any quest, any difficulty! Bring it on!”

“Your eyes are showing dollar signs, Riho.”

Quite the portrait of greed. Yet Lloyd’s look was—inexplicably—one of respect.

Gosh, Riho’s taken control of the situation! She’s preventing me from getting beaten up!

Of course she wasn’t.

The more I think about it, the more her personality matches Allan’s description!

At this point, literally anything would just add to his speculation that Riho=Azami Princess.

Speaking of, Riho was well into the specifics of the negotiation by now, inquiring about deadlines and party sizes.

And Katsu got swept up in it.

“Very well,” he said. “We do have a pile of tricky quests at the moment. We’ll get an idea of what you’re capable of if we assign them to your group alone.”

“Awesome. Give us a SS-Rank quest with hella rewards...what’s up, Lloyd?”

He’d suddenly leaned over and tapped her shoulder.

“Riho, it’ll be fine. No need to look after me.”

“Huh? What?” she gaped at him.

She hadn’t been looking after anything but her wallet.

“You’re worried I’ll get myself beaten up if they test me here, right? That’s why you’re negotiating all these conditions. But it’ll be fine.”

“Huh?”

Her jaw stayed open as her mind refused to process all of this.

Lloyd gave her a confident smile.

“I’m much stronger now. Maybe I can’t take all of them at once, but I can definitely handle one.”

“N-No, I just wanna get cheddar from a hard quest...you don’t want it?”

She was starting to sound like a waiter at a cheeseburger shop.

But Lloyd was too sold on his ‘Riho is worried’ theory to listen. He turned back to Katsu.

“Let’s cut to the chase, Proxy Master Katsu. The gentlemen behind you are here to test me, right?”

Light gleamed in the eyes of the assembled warriors, their glares so intense he shivered. But his smile didn’t waver.

“The Azami army has hardened me quite a bit. Not as much as they did Allan, but I’m happy to demonstrate.”

“They hardened your *what?!?*”

“.....Not what he meant, Selen.”

Selen could always be counted on to ruin any grand speech.

Katsu ignored her and Phyllo’s response, grinning happily.

“It never does to judge by appearances,” he said. “Seems like you’ve got balls,

at least. And we're not gonna argue with that."

With the situation leaning toward combat, Allan expressed a different concern.

"Uh, Lloyd, are you sure about this?"

"Don't worry about me, Allan. I'm an Azami soldier!"

"I mean, can you pull your punches?"

If Lloyd went all out, each swing he took would kill at least one person, possibly two.

Despite Allan's fears, Lloyd and the guild members were hyping themselves up.

An especially powerful-looking man stepped forward, looming over Lloyd.

"Your friends are all fretting. Last chance to change your mind, boy. I don't know the meaning of mercy."

"Well, I'm not here for that! Let me show you my full strength!"

The blood drained from his friends' faces.

"Oh, dear! Not your *full* strength! Restraint is a virtue!"

Not even Selen wanted to see the man she loved killing anyone, even if they could claim force majeure. (Her history of stalking had left her well versed in these legal loopholes.) "Ha! Give it a rest, the boy's ready to go."

".....That's not the problem."

This meathead never suspected it was Lloyd's words that left them shivering.

"It's the other way around!" Riho yelled. "Battles suck! Let's do a quest, c'mon!"

She hadn't quite given up on that yet.

Katsu was taking Lloyd's mettle as a happy twist in his favor.

"You talk like a real soldier! But as I've said, we have a reputation to maintain. You'll need to fight this guy."

"Q-question! Is he...durable?"

“Yes, if you must fight Lloyd, send your most durable man.”

“Huh? What kinda request is that?” Katsu asked, eyes widening, but he soon figured it out. “Ohhh, you’re trying to get someone strong with defense and weak on offense so Lloyd’s less likely to get hurt. Clever!”

“I’ve been on the front lines for over a decade! I’ve protected countless clients and comrades! I’m the most durable man in this guild!”

Lloyd’s opponent raised his shield, flaunting the scars that covered every inch of his muscular body. If they let him keep talking, he was liable to start explaining where he got them.

“.....Maybe it’ll work out?”

“At the least he won’t drop dead on the first hit.”

Phyllo and Allan let out a sigh of relief. Even Lloyd likely couldn’t vaporize this guy on contact.

But the guy took it the other way around, and wagged a finger at them.

“Not so fast! You wanna keep people safe, you’ve gotta hit hard, too. Once I was up against a whole swam of slimes—”

“No anecdotes, please.”

They did not care, nor were they interested in the man’s abilities. It was sad but true.

Fighting back his tears, Lloyd’s opponent settled for cracking his knuckles.

“Psychological tactics are so underhanded... Let’s just get this fight started!”

He started inching forward, and Lloyd didn’t back down—no, he was probably gallantly suppressing his fears. Hands raised, he bowed his head. “The honor is all mine,” he said.

“Well, you’re a fine soldier in spirit, anyway. Sorry, Lloyd, but this is how we do things.”

The look on Katsu’s face made it clear Lloyd’s attitude had already sold him on helping the war effort.

Meanwhile, his friends were all praying this would not be the day Lloyd

became a murderer—but to others, they just looked as if they were praying he'd survive this. The total opposite!

“Please pull your punches.”

“.....Hold back.”

“Be ready to jump in if it goes south!”

Long ago, Allan had gone up against Lloyd ignorantly as well, and the memories left him with shaky knees.

“Th-this is just what I tried to do before we enlisted! Can't believe I told Lloyd to just punch me in the face as hard as he could...”

We've all been there. Something doesn't seem like a big deal at the time, but in retrospect was hella dicey, and the realization leaves you with a knot in the pit of your stomach. Like when you narrowly avoid a crash on the drive home, but it doesn't sink in until that night in the bath.

Lloyd also took their desperate pleas as cries of support, and gave them a wave of acknowledgement before facing the adventurer with the shield again.

“I'll show you how tough I am!”

“Bring it!”

If Lloyd swung at full strength, this guy would end up showing his soft insides, but he sure seemed confident.

And...

“Begin!” Katsu cried.

Both men jumped in swinging their fists.

“Come at me, boy! Shield Charge!”

The man raced forward, shield held in front. And Lloyd—

“First a light jab to throw him off his pace! I've learned how to fight smart!”

No longer starting with his strongest moves, Lloyd simply did that to the man's shield.

But as you all know, Lloyd's light jab was like no other in town.

——*Bwaaam!* (The man's shield bending.) *Craashhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!* (The man flew out the top floor window.) The heavy metal shield crumpled as if hit with a wrecking ball, and the man went rocketing backwards as fast as he'd charged in.

In the blink of an eye, he was outside the window, several stories up. But for someone who'd tangled with Lloyd, he'd definitely gotten off easy.

"So glad he didn't hit me...," Allan whispered. The idea alone made him weak in the knees.

Proxy Master Katsu was every bit as stunned.

"How...?"

The rest of the adventurers wondered the same.

While Lloyd himself...

"Huh?"

...was blinking in disbelief. How had it been that easy to send a man flying?

With nearly everyone unable to believe their eyes, there was a very long silence.

"Oh!" Lloyd said. "The Adventurer Guild just wanted a fight to save face. They always meant to support the war effort, but they had to act the part. Otherwise, I'd never win that easy."



You just did. You always do.

Lloyd might have gained more confidence, but he had yet to work out just how wide the gulf was between him and everyone else.

The sight of the man flying out the window filled his friends with horror.

“Not good! Throwing someone from this height is a felony for sure!”

“We won’t let that happen, Selen! There’s a solid basis to reduce the charge to involuntary manslaughter!”

“.....Fifteen-year sentence, reduced to ten if on good behavior.”

“Phyllo, I didn’t want to know that! Don’t worry, he’s likely just broken every bone in the man’s body and ruptured several organs. He’ll live!”

Doesn’t sound too good.

“D-don’t just stand there!” Katsu roared, his mind finally registering what had happened. “Go pick him up! If we hurry, he should be fine!”

Even with a shield, a fall from this height would definitely cause compound fractures. They might even have to peel him off the pavement and get him to Colonel Choline, the area’s healing magic expert. But before that could happen, a woman’s voice cut Katsu off.

“He was *not* fine. Abrasions, ruptured organs, joints dislocated, bones broken, you name it.”

She was standing in the door—with the adventurer in her arms.

“_____?!”

She had her hair tied up loose, and wore a cheap off-season sweater and basic slacks, both covered in a black cloak of a style not found anywhere near Azami. She made quite an impression.

“Was...? Past tense?”

“Yeah, ’cause I fixed him up.”

The cloak lady dumped the man down on a couch. He was out like a light, but visibly uninjured. Lloyd took one look at that— “See? The whole falling out a

window thing was just an act. They had a healer on standby below. You'd think after my acting experience in Rokujou I'd be able to tell, but I guess I've got a lot to learn."

—and put his own spin on things. In this case, you could hardly blame him. The man *had* fallen out a window without breaking anything.

Not only was nothing broken, he had not a single scratch on him. Despite not taking one of Lloyd's hits, the fall alone should have messed him up bad—even *after* treatment from a top-class healer.

This lady was clearly a force to be reckoned with. Who was she? Lloyd's friends all braced themselves.

"Man, he was heavy. Left my shoulders all stiff!"

This lady was letting the shocked looks pass right over her.

"——!"

Only one man moved: Katsu. Without a word, he walked to her side— then went down on one knee, bowing low.

"I-it's been far too long, Guild Master!"

""""Guild Master?!""""

Every other person present yelled in unison.

"Oh, 'sup, Kacchin. You got old," she said, not batting an eye while lounging on the couch as if she owned the place.

"This room hasn't changed much, though. If you're gonna work in here, you could rip out the floorboards and redecorate it to be a proper office!"

As the guild master took in her surroundings, Riho leaned over to Selen and Phyllo.

"Isn't she a bit *too* young? I was expecting someone older."

"She's gotta be at least Katsu's age."

".....Is she an enchantress?"

The guild master's ears caught Phyllo's whisper, and she looked back over her

shoulder.

“An enchantress? I like it! The Enchantress Guild Master! You’ve got a way with words. Have 50,000 Rinko points.”

She certainly marched to her own tune.

“Um, Guild Master...” Katsu stammered.

“Oh, sorry, were you in the middle of something?”

“That’s not it! Where have you been?! It’s been over a decade! And look at you! You haven’t changed a—mmph!”

“Kacchin, not another word. I am the enchantress, Rinko—and what have we here?”

Rinko kept one finger on Katsu’s lips, but her eyes fell on a familiar face.

“Is that you? What was your name? Lloyd, right?”

“Er, are you...um...”

“Sh-she knows Lloyd?” Allan said, flabbergasted. “How do you know the guild master?”

Lloyd put chin in hand, thinking.

“Um...oh! The lady from the Ascorbic Domain! I thought it was a bathroom and walked right into her house. And she let me use her bathroom anyway! Rinko, right?”

“Yup, that’s me! Can’t believe you opened that door without even realizing it.”

She shook her head, impressed. Katsu was gaping at the two of them.

“The Ascorbic Domain?! Why were you *there*?”

“Best you don’t know. But what’s going on here?”

“Well, um...”

Lloyd gave her the rundown, and she cracked up.

“That explains it! You always were hardheaded, Kacchin. Not that I don’t get it.”

She patted his head as if he were child.

“Rinko! We’re in front of the boys! We need to uphold our reputation!”

“Yeah, those have their uses. But I promise, this kid’s legit. There’s a ball of some kind? I’ll go. No big deal. Wanted to drop in on someone anyway.”

Like that, the invite issue was settled. Lloyd looked pleased.

However, given Rinko’s unheard-of healing skills and unusual garb, Riho was still suspicious.

“If you can heal that guy with the shield so easily, you’re no ordinary mage.”

“Mm?”

“And I’ve seen a cape like that before. Over in Jiou—”

Eug had worn something similar to it, but before Riho could say another word, Katsu interrupted.



“Watch what you say, one-armed girl! She’s not with Jiou! She’s—”

“Kacchin,” Rinko said, stopping him again. “Not another word.”

“S-sorry.”

Rinko rose to her feet and shot them an impish smile. Like a grin you might receive from an older cousin, it drained all hostility from the situation.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a threat to you. I’m one of those wise hermits who retired early. I just happened to have broken the level cap first.”

“The what?”

“Sorry, I’ve got this one-track mind, can’t stop making game references.” Rinko rapped the side of her head, then added, “But the ball’s coming up, right? I’ll be there, and accepting questions.”

Phyllo gave Riho’s clothes a tug.

“.....She’s not a bad person.”

“I don’t think she is, either. Sorry to have acted all suspicious, Guild Master.”

“Please, call me Rinko. We’re not strangers anymore!”

“Well, Rinko, we’ll see you on the big day.”

“Cool. Bye, Lloyd!”

Rinko fluttered her fingers and sent them packing.

Alone with her proxy, Katsu began peppering her with questions.

“Guild Master, what’s brought you back now? It’s been over a decade. Why were you in the Ascorbic Domain? And the lack of ag—the enchantress attribute?”

Rinko took a long sip of tea, letting the questions go in one ear and out the other.

“I’m an enchantress! Wait, that’s not really an answer.”

“Not at all.”

“Uh, well, things happened. And I got curious enough to come back and poke

around. I'll need your help!"

"Your wish is my command. The boys will be thrilled. What are we looking into?"

Rinko grinned.

"Well, the lay of the land. Or the world, rather. And..."

"And?"

"Can you help me figure out where Princess Maria's hiding herself?"

On the way home from the Adventurer Guild, Lloyd noted just how keen an eye Riho had.

Is that part of being a princess?

Lloyd conceptualized princesses as preternaturally capable. Country folk often had exaggerated ideas of what city royalty are like. Even today, they tend to assume celebrity sightings are commonplace, when really, they aren't.

So Riho's the princess... No, I'd better be sure before I ask. Is she really in love with me?

Well, that last part was undeniable.

Lloyd's heart was spinning. Same thing happens to any boy who finds out a girl they thought was just a friend wants something more.

"I can't ask directly. I've gotta be subtle...but I have to know for sure," Lloyd whispered to himself.

"Mm? What's on your mind, Lloyd?" Riho asked.

Lloyd jumped. "Er, n-nothing. Forget about it."

"You're not fooling anyone, but suit yourself. We'd better get going."

He nodded, even more certain of his path.

She's keeping this secret. I've gotta ask without the others catching on. Find a way for just the two of us to be together...but how?

Lloyd kept pondering the question the whole way home.

Shortly before Lloyd got back...

Princess Maria might spend the bulk of her time posing as Marie the Witch, and polish her slobby shopkeeper lifestyle, but today she was staring down at the notorious kid grandma Alka with a grim look.

“So Lloyd’s brother claims to know nothing more than we do.”

“Bluntly, yes. And that in itself confirms my suspicions.”

Alka took a sip of her drink, the amber liquor a strange sight in her small hands.

“I really wish you wouldn’t turn to drinking, Master. If someone walked in, they’d think I’m corrupting an innocent child.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll finish it before anyone sees. I need to down a whole barrel before I even turn red, anyway.”

“Let’s keep it to one glass, then. It’s like pouring booze through a sieve. Such a waste!”

Marie knocked back her own glass, already flushed.

“Woof, that stings!” she said. “Okay, to sum up, Sou was a runeman you made, and he should have vanished, but didn’t. He wound up wandering the world, trapped by the shackles of his own heroism. And was deliberately playing the villain in the hopes of freeing himself.”

“And his misdeeds were sporadic at best. Only in the last few years did he start moving with any purpose, after he teamed up with Shouma and Eug.”

“A brother figure who wanted to turn Lloyd into a hero, and a runeman who thought the arrival of a new hero would allow him to disappear. I can see how their interests would align.”

“On top of which we’ve got Eug, who’s trying to plunge the world into chaos, and force the world’s technology level to anachronistic standards.”

Alka polished off her glass.

“But then Sou tried to *kill* Lloyd. Someone told him that that was the only way he could ever truly cease to be.”

“That must have been someone he trusted, right? Are we sure it wasn’t Dr.

Eug?”

“She wouldn’t risk losing a pawn before her plans succeed. But it’s only possible if you know not only how runes work, but exactly what is motivating both Sou and Eug.”

“And that’s why you suspect King Eve of Profen?”

Alka nodded quietly.

“Like me, she’s immortal, and well-versed in the art of runes. She was once my employer, if that sheds any light on things.”

“Your...employer? I can’t even begin to imagine what secrets lie in your past, but it sure is a small world.”

“Even so, I can’t imagine what she would get out of Lloyd’s death. For better or for worse, he’s had nothing to do with this mess.”

Marie gave that some thought. Then an idea struck her. “That may not be true. I mean...it would force *you* to take a side.”

“What? Maybe if he was a hostage, but if he’s dead...”

“If Lloyd was dead, what would you do?”

“Well...”

Alka trailed off.

Marie took a swig of her drink. “I know you. You’d do everything possible to bring him back. Or make a new Lloyd out of runes. Like you made Sou.”

“Mm. I don’t even wanna think about it, but...that does sound like me.”

“Their real goal—or at least Dr. Eug’s—isn’t to raise the technology level. That’s just a means to control the device within the last dungeon, right? They might be actively engaged in rune research, and if bringing Lloyd back to life hinged on that, you’d definitely work with them.”

“I probably would...”

“That’s my best guess, anyway. If we’re still not totally convinced Eve is the real villain—do you have any suspects in mind?”

Alka folded her arms, thinking hard.

“The only other possibility is Lab Chief Cordelia. But she has no motivation I’m aware of, and I’m not even sure she still exists.”

“You told me about that fateful day. She’s the one who approved King Eve and Dr. Eug’s actions? But if you’re not sure why or what she was thinking, it’s hard to really say anything for sure.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, if Eve’s really king of Profen, I’ll have opportunities to dig further. I’m the princess, after all. Hic.”

“Hic?”

“Why don’t you use runes to make more Lloyds so we can each get one? Maybe have a Lloyd in each hand! A Lloyd sandwich! One for cooking, one for making whoopee...hic.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Welp! I’ll do whate’er I can on a political level, I’m a princesssssssss...”

Marie’s words were slurring. Definitely the type who went from sober to pieces in no time flat.

Which is, of course, when Lloyd came in.

“I’m back! Oh?”

“Lloyd! At laaaast!” Marie cried.

“There you are, Lloyd. Through the glass of my tumbler, you sure are a sight to behold.”

He’d barely stepped in through the door and he already had a tipsy witch on one sleeve, and a kid grandma drunk on her own shtick on the other. You really couldn’t help but laugh.

“Ah-ha-ha, you sure keep things lively.”

Marie had started throwing kisses at him, which left Alka to play against her usual role in these routines.

“She was talking normally a minute ago! The liquor hit her all at once. She’s the worst type of drunk!”

“Yeah, it’s hard to figure out when to cut her off.”

Oblivious to the scorn being heaped on her, Marie just kept babbling.

“Timing is everything in life, and it’s always so haaaaard!”

She fell flat on the table, pouring herself another glass.

Lloyd took this chance to ask about the princess again.

“Um, I know I’ve asked this before, but I need to find the princess. Or at least know more about what she’s like!”

Marie let out a boozy burp.

“Eh-heh-heh...Lloyd, you’re curious about her?”

“I guess you could say that.”

“The princess is a lot closer than you realize.”

“She is?”

“Yep. The princess is actually me! Woo!”

This was her level best attempt at telling him, but in the midst of a drunken ramble it was not exactly convincing. Quite the opposite, really.

Yet it seemed to be earning Lloyd’s respect.

“Maintaining that cover story even when you’re drunk! I was hoping you’d let it slip, but I guess the secret’s safe with you.”

Marie didn’t let her reveal’s abject failure get her down...she didn’t even notice that it had backfired.

“I *am* the princess! I just don’t wanna go back to the castle. Not unless you’ll be my prince, Lloyd.”

“Sure, sure, have some turmeric tea.”

This was said with the exact same tone a doctor uses when prescribing medicine. A voice conveying experience.

Alka shook her head, watching Marie melt.

“He’s never gonna believe you at this rate.”

“Why won’t you trust meeee?!” Marie sobbed.

“But why would Lloyd suddenly be interested in the princess?” Alka muttered, crossing her arms. “I might have to dig into that.”

From the grim look on her face, this concern clearly preempted the whole serious talk from earlier. She was as bad as Marie, really.

“Lloyd’s interested in me?! That can only mean one thing! Love is in the air!”

“Hmm, you’re getting on my last nerve. Have a curse! This one will make you very itchy and you won’t be able to figure out where the itch is.”

Everyone’s had that happen to them. You scratch and scratch but can’t quite pin it down. A cruel and unusual punishment.

But Marie was so far gone even when the curse hit her, she just wailed, “I’m all itchy, Lloyd, scratch it for me!”

Lloyd ignored this even more than the princess thing, pondering the rest of what she’d said.

“But that could be valuable information. Someone close to me—that really does sound like Riho. I can’t imagine anything else!”

He was edging close to certainty.

“Wooo! Rahhh!”

Little did Marie realize her drunken warbling had pushed him even further from the truth.

Day two of Lloyd’s “Riho is the princess” conviction...

The day’s lectures went in one ear and out the other, his mind entirely fixated on the possibility.

Given the subject at hand, I’ve gotta find a way to be alone with her.

He glanced over at Riho, who was clearly not paying much attention.

But if it is Riho...I mean, we get along and everything. But I’m still not right for

her...

“Okay, this bit here. Lloyd, gimme your answer,” Choline called.

“Urp?! What? S-sorry, I wasn’t listening.”

Lloyd was usually an excellent student, so Choline shot him a puzzled frown.

“What’s getting to you, Lloyd? You always pay close attention. Did you not sleep well?”

“N-No, that’s not it.”

Naturally, Selen—a connoisseur of Lloyd’s condition—jumped on that.

“Lloyd is not himself today at all. His fingers are lingering on each page turn, as if something is occupying his mind.”

Riho shot them a grin, but her words betrayed her concern.

“Yeah? Lloyd, if *Selen’s* calling you weird...what’s on your mind?”

“Yeah, ah-ha-ha.”

Unable to admit he’d been thinking about *her*, he just awkwardly laughed it off.

After class, he tried to find a way to be alone with her...

“Um, Riho...”

“Did you need her for something, Sir Lloyd?”

But Selen swooped in to interrupt! An act not of conscious thought, but pure instinct! She was like an automated defense turret!

Reminded again just how strange his relationship with her was, Lloyd had to think up a different plan.

“Selen’s just being a good soldier and making sure Riho and I don’t do anything inappropriate. I really wasn’t planning on *that...*”

Nah, this was just her usual stalker shtick. Really, Selen was far more likely to do something inappropriate to *him*. She had long ago cast aside morality like a used rag.

But Lloyd’s thoughts were going in circles. Before he knew it, classes were

over, and it was afternoon—he'd missed his chance.

Allan was cracking his knuckles, ready for action.

"Back to the ball prep! My gaffer soul's afire!"

No one needs a fire here, buster. Allan and his magic stone were the only ones looking motivated.

"The lighting loon is seriously getting on my last nerve."

".....Pretend he's not there."

Selen and Phyllo started walking away.

"Oh? Where are you going?" Lloyd asked.

"Anyone assigned to server duty is required to report for lessons on etiquette."

".....I can't just say, 'Drink this?'"

"It's not a bar, Phyllo. That would be odd even there! This class may well last all day."

Selen sighed, spying trouble in her future.

".....Hang in there."

"If you're inclined to console me, try and learn."

".....I'll do what I can."

Riho pointed her fingers at them, cackling.

"Glad I'm a mouthy merc! With this bulky mithril on me, nobody wants me working as wait staff."

"Hngg, well make sure you ace the prep. And don't do anything weird with Lloyd!"

"As if, I'm not you."

".....Selen, we should go."

At Phyllo's urging, Selen reluctantly headed out. Allan excitedly ran off toward the warehouse...and Lloyd and Riho were left alone together.

“Okay, we’ve gotta check the patrol routes, and clean if we’ve got time to spare.”

Determined not to miss this opportunity, Lloyd stepped up right next to her.

“...Uh, what’s up?”

“Take this,” he said, handing her a letter.

She blinked at it.

“Uh, what’s this about?”

“Read it...later.”

With that, he walked quickly away.

Good. Now I just have to pray Riho’s waiting where I asked her to.

Just what had Lloyd written in that letter?

Riho put the note in her pocket, dumbfounded.

“What is this? A love letter? No way. Ugh, I’m as bad as Selen.”

But that idea stayed lodged in her brain, and when she got home and read it, she turned very red.

All it said was that he had something important to talk about—and named a time and place. Very much like he was asking her out.

If you took the words literally, it was just a normal dinner invitation, but when she factored in the lengths he’d taken to avoid Selen’s attention, and her own prior assumptions...well, this conclusion was inevitable.

Lloyd had spent a chunk of the class steadily writing the letter, all so he could talk to her in private.

“B-b-b-b-but, I...”

Riho did not sleep that night.

Chapter 2

Completely Understandable: Who Wouldn't Get the Wrong Idea if Given Handmade Chocolate on Valentine's Day?

Love Letter (n.)

A letter professing one's affections.

If the letter had been placed in her shoebox, Riho would have assumed it was a prank, and laughed it off.

But Lloyd had given it to her directly. Back in the Azami Academy girls' dorm, she read it over again and again, her cheeks flushed red.

"What does this mean?!"

What had led Lloyd to hand her this letter? It would have made sense if he'd given it to her back when she was still preoccupied with Rol's exploits, but...she had no idea what could have brought this on now.

Baffled as she was, she washed her ribbon, and used her *good* shampoo.

The next day, she headed where the letter stated, her heart torn between hope and fear. It's unsurprising that she couldn't help but have expectations.

He'd invited her to a nice restaurant on the North Side. One that offered private rooms. Not the fanciest place around, but definitely expensive. The kind of splurge you made on a first date, which Lloyd would do.

"I could understand going a café or a donut shop, but a place like this?"

It *had* to be a date. It was also evening! There was no other explanation. Riho's mouth felt as dry as a bone.

Her pulse racing like a woman framed for a crime she did not commit.

"Oh, Riho! Sorry to call you out like this."

Lloyd was wearing nice clothes to fit the dress code, and that made her heart

beat even faster.

“H-hi,” she managed.

He’d simply chosen clothing fit to meet a princess...but it sure seemed as if he was trying to make a good impression on a date.

“Er, um...”

Riho had no words. Lloyd bobbed his head, and gestured to the restaurant doors.

“Shall we, Riho?”

“S-sure...”

He led her inside. The interior was sleek—not *too* gaudy—and there was live music playing. The place definitely set the mood.

The host led them to a private room, and they sat down across from each other.

A moment later, a man wearing a chef’s hat and a subtle smile appeared, accompanied by a waitress whose smile was even brighter.

“Good evening. My name is Mitchell, and I’ll be your chef for this evening.”

“And I’m your server, Raymeen.”

A greeting from the staff, with impeccable manners. This was just how restaurants like this worked. They responded in kind.

“How polite! I’m Lloyd.”

“H-hi. Riho.”

The waitress filled their water glasses from a bottle so fancy it made them want to say, “Really? You’re sure that’s not wine?” It was almost certainly calcium-rich mineral water.

Riho took a sip and was surprised by the almondy aftertaste.

“.....It really *is* water. I was pretty parched!”

On any other day she’d have scoffed at all the ceremony over a glass of water, but...on a date with Lloyd, in an establishment that seemed fit for people to pull

out a ring and go down on one knee...she really needed that hydration.

Riho would have been less stressed dining with a hitman. She'd already been shot in the heart, so this was more or less the same thing.

Geez, I can't talk shit about Allan now. Not if dining with VIPs feels like this...

Courses started rolling out. Riho was too wound up to taste the hors d'oeuvre or the salad and spent most of the time with her eyes glued to Lloyd's face, wondering what this was about.

"....."

Lloyd, meanwhile, was as nervous as she was. Since he'd convinced himself that she was the princess, he thought he was dining with royalty...which made him appear as if he was gearing up to ask her out.

What's going on?! Why is he stressed out?!

The same reason she was? No, it was too soon to assume that. But the more her mind spun in circles, the more she felt that a proposal was coming, and the more frazzled she got.

Picking up on that, Lloyd attempted to ease the tension with some small talk. However, this just played right into her suspicions and made things worse.

The chef had likely poured his soul into the medium rare chuck eye steak, but they were too nervous to savor it. At last, the meal was coming to an end and dessert was on the table before them.

Lloyd was clearly gathering his courage to broach the subject.

"Er, um...Riho!"

"Y-yes? What?"

He was all but fumbling for the ring in his pocket.

Lloyd bobbed his head. "Sorry," he said. But the next words caught Riho completely by surprise. "I-I've figured out what you've been hiding!"

"Pardon?"

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head. She hadn't been aware she was hiding anything.

But when you hear something like that, the human mind tries to connect the dots. He wasn't fishing for an admission, but that was the result.

What I'm hiding? I mean, I sold Micono some junk, telling her it belonged to Marie...

It's okay to go ahead and cry, Micono.

She assumed that was the case, and Riho answered accordingly.

"W-well, I felt bad for lying, but really, something like that? The blame lies on whoever falls for it."

"Urp. Sorry."

"Huh? What for?"

She'd been pinning the blame on Micono, but he'd apologized out of nowhere.

He looked genuinely repentant.

"There were certainly many clues. I should have figured it out. But you're such a good actress...I never once thought you were lying!"

"I dunno if that's a *good* thing..."

But was this something you did at a fancy restaurant? Riho was starting to realize this might not be about Micono.

"Um, Lloyd, can we both take a deep breath here? First, why don't you spell out exactly what you're talking about."

"Oh, the fact that you're the missing princess of Azami."

"Ha? The what? I'm even more confused. Mm?"

"Wh-what's wrong?"

"Thought someone was looking at us. Uh, point is, I'm not the princess. Marie is."

"You can't fool me! If she was the princess, Azami would be in big trouble."

"Can't argue there."

Go ahead and cry, Marie.

“But uh, walk me through this, then. Why’d you end up assuming I was the princess?”

Riho continued to ask questions to figure out Lloyd’s logic, and how he arrived at that conclusion.

Unaware that Selen was skulking in the shadows...

Earlier, when Lloyd had been slipping Riho the letter...

He was as careful as a spy passing on important information, taking every precaution to attract as little notice as possible.

So desperate to avoid attention that he acted a bit *too* normal and actually attracted suspicion.

““——!!”” Bzzt.

Selen and Phyllo could sense these things. They could feel it on their *skin*. Both of them had clearly installed some sort of psychic radar.

Then, the way Riho had acted after that sealed the deal. She was so obviously acting like a girl who’d gotten a love letter that no one could mistake it for anything else.

““.....Hmm.””

Their frowns deepened. And when Selen saw Riho’s light on all night long—proof she wasn’t sleeping—that settled things.

“I smell *war*...”

In full Love General mode, Selen concluded that *something* was *up*. She immediately contacted her fiercest warrior, Phyllo. The two wild beings, *feared* for their zeal, called in every favor and connection they had and soon uncovered the time and place of Lloyd’s secret rendezvous.

And now? They were lurking in the restaurant’s garden, monitoring their every move. Selen had gone so far as to pluck leaves from a tree, mingling them with her hair like a veteran sniper.

“Vritra, turn that mirror ten degrees left.”

Selen was hissing orders to her belt like she was talking into a tin can

telephone. Only she would treat the former guardian beast of Kunlun as a tool in her stalker kit.

Vritra might not have visible emotions, but he was clearly taking this treatment poorly.

“Why am I an accessory to your crimes?”

A bit late for that concern.

“Vritra, make that fifteen. And make it snappy.”

“Y-yes, Mistress!”

“.....You sure have subjugated him.”

He was a legendary being, spoken of in fables—and Selen was treating him like a new hire. Phyllo found herself respecting that.

Except Selen was too focused on the mirror to notice, staring diligently. She was truly a professional stalker.

“Hmm, I can’t get a good view. We may have to get closer.”

Phyllo shook her head. “.....The security poses a challenge. This restaurant is nice.”

She pointed at Mitchell and Raymeen, their eyes closely watching their guests for any hint of trouble.

“But if I back down here, I wouldn’t be Selen Hemein.”

“.....Fair.”

That had become her essence.

There was nothing further to be gained by hiding within the shrubbery. Unable to stomach further delays, Selen demanded action.

“Phyllo, if you object, then offer an alternative.”

“.....If we just knew *why* Master asked Riho here.....”

She thought for a long moment, then leaned over and whispered to Selen’s belt buckle.

“.....Vritra, move the mirror a little higher. Focus on Master’s lips.”

“Oh! Certainly.”

The mirror swiftly moved. Vritra had clearly learned his place.

“Why focus on Lloyd’s lips? I mean, they are as cute as they are sexy.”

“.....Agreed.”

Vritra was not sure this opinion was strictly relevant, but the look on Phyllo’s face kept him from speaking.

Her lips curling up, she explained the plan.

“.....If we can’t hear, but we *can* see...then we just have to read his lips.”

“You can do that? You can tell what he’s saying just by how his lips are moving?”

“.....To a degree. The mirror’s a bit too small.....and my sister is much better at it.”

Selen thought about Mena for one second and decided that made perfect sense.

“I wouldn’t put anything past her. Phyllo, even if you’re not confident, it’s better than nothing. Give it a shot.”

“.....I already am.”

She squinted, focusing on Lloyd’s lips.

She began whispering fragmented words, saying anything she could make out.

“.....I.....princess.....please.”

“Whaaaaaat? He wants her to be his princess?! I cannot stand for this!”

Her voice was getting a bit too loud. “Mistress Selen!” Vritra hissed. “Keep it down or...gah!”

Selen clamped one hand over her mouth, but the other was unconsciously squeezing her belt. Poor Vritra.

“That certainly sounds like a confession. The only other reasonable interpretation is ‘I know who my princess is—Selen. I wish to date her, so please

help me.’”

She certainly could find a way to twist everything to her advantage, but Phyllo wasn't buying it.

“That’s too many words between the ones I read. And I could have read them wrong.”

“Argh, now I’m even more curious!”

They were now hovering like kids with presents they’d promised not to open.

The result...

“No choice.”

“.....Frontal assault.”

As if they did anything else...

As Selen and Phyllo got ready to burst in, Lloyd sensed trouble in the air.

“Something’s coming...but it doesn’t exactly feel *hostile*...”

“What’s going on, Lloyd? They canceled the reward for the princess ages ago. So how’d you end up thinking I was her? Did Mena put you up to this?”

Riho was doing her level best to straighten his thoughts out, but he was too busy thinking to notice.

Since I came in...since I first said the word “princess”...gasp! Someone else suspected Riho was the princess, and now they know! They might be after her life!

Lloyd was just digging himself deeper and deeper into the hole. Unable to let this imagined fate come to pass, he decided it was time to go.

“R-Riho! We’ll talk later. We’ve gotta go now, or your life will be in danger!”

“M-my life?! Aughh!”

He grabbed her hand tight and pulled her along after him. This was much too sudden, and her mind was left behind.

Lloyd darted his eyes left and right, and they met Mitchell’s.

“In a hurry, Sir?”

“We are...sorry!”

Mitchell nodded, taking this in stride. “Someone’s after you, I presume?”

“Oh! Yes. You knew?”

“I’ve been in this line of work long enough.”

Their chef was one step ahead of them while Riho was still wondering, *After us?*

Mitchell snapped his fingers, and told Raymeen to have the back door ready.

“It will lead you to the alley. It is quite narrow, so do mind your attire.”



“Th-thank you!”

“Honestly, I’ve always wanted to do this. Sneaking someone out the back entrance is a real thrill!”

Mitchell had certainly been convincing in his role as a chef with underworld experience, but perhaps he was just enthusiastic. Similar to a taxi driver who gets really into it if you say, “Follow that cab!”

“Go! Before they catch you!”

“Thank you. And you, Raymeen!”

“Heh-heh. Let us hope fate allows us to meet again.”

Raymeen was waving them out the back door, clearly also super into this. It was definitely less that she’d read way too many spy novels and more that she was just seizing the opportunity to flaunt her stuff. Like sitting in class imagining how you’d react if terrorists attacked your school.

But their skillful moves had let Lloyd make a clean getaway, looking as grim as Riho was confused.

He was convinced villains were after the princess’s life. (Ha!) It wasn’t really Riho’s style to go along with this, but she was caught up in the moment.

After running for a while, they found themselves in a deserted North Side alley, in the dead of night. Away from the storefronts, the luminescent stones were far and few between. This road likely had its share of ghosts on moonless nights.

“We should be safe here.”

“Safe from what?!”

Riho, who was still confused about the current situation, was searching for answers. Who could follow this huge misunderstanding—first that she was a princess, and second that her life was in danger?

For one thing, Riho simply refused to believe he was serious about her being the princess. That made the rest of his actions entirely incomprehensible.

Lloyd, however, was dead serious. I mean, he always was, but when lives

were at stake, even more so.

“Riho!”

“Y-yes?”

He knew part of guard duty was to keep your client calm.

“Don’t worry. I’ll keep you safe.”

“Oh. Okay.....sure.....”

She didn’t know *why*.

But that was one stop short of a proposal and too powerful a blow for her reeling mind to process. All doubts and questions went out the window and she simply accepted everything at face value. She would have bought a pricey vase from Lloyd right now.

The few streetlamps and moonlight enhanced the romantic atmosphere, something you would see in a movie. Like a damsel in distress and her bodyguard.

Though that kind of romance is always ruined by the villain.

“You thought you could get away from me?!”

“.....Mm.”

Pursuant henchmen are pretty much always a talkative idiot with a silent partner, and Selen and Phyllo had those roles—and Lloyd and Riho—on lockdown.

“Wh-what are you two doing here?” Lloyd stammered.

Riho knew that ruining romantic developments was Selen’s purpose in life, so she just took this as a matter of course. Humans can get used to anything.

“Damn, you again?” she muttered. She wasn’t sure why they were having a face-off but Lloyd’s promise left her feeling pretty confident. “What’s this about? Care to explain yourselves?”

“I would think it obvious. I have no idea what scheme led to this, Riho, but your diabolical attempts to force Lloyd into marriage end here.”

“Isn’t that your thing?”

“.....Mm.” Phyllo was nodding vigorously.

Paying that no heed whatsoever, Selen’s screech went up a notch.

“Then we’ll have to use force! Only *I* can be Lloyd’s princess!”

“.....Exactly.”

Selen and Phyllo took fighting stances, and Riho grinned.

“Ha! Never thought I’d have to legit duel against you two.”

“.....It’s two against one.....surrender now.”

“Two against one, is it? Ha! That’s what you think.”

She had *Lloyd*.

He’d promised to protect her.

But of course, Lloyd was busy wildly misinterpreting this.

Princess...force...does that mean?!

Conjectures after conjecture appeared in his mind.

*Oh! This is a struggle for succession! Anyone strong can become king in Azami!
This land is ruled by force alone! And I’m seeing that play out right in front of
me!*

He was always like this, but today he’d leapt to even wilder conclusions than usual. “Might makes right” creates quite the post-apocalyptic dynastic ascension.

Selen’s going to attack before Riho can be publicly revealed as the princess at the ball. She’s determined to fight for the throne!

She was certainly proving *something*, but Lloyd leaped to the conclusion that civilians shouldn’t be involved, and clapped Riho on the shoulder.

She spun around happily. He’d sworn to protect her!

“Lloyd!

“Sorry, Riho. I can’t help you here.”

“Wait, what? You *just* swore you would!”

This was the loudest Riho had yelled all day.

She felt as if the ladder she was standing on had been yanked out from under her, and she wailed, “You’ve gotta be kidding!”

But Lloyd was totally serious. Not joking at all.

“I-I can’t! I’ve got no place interfering with a royal succession!”

“Royal what?! What are you *talking* about?!”

But Selen merely saw this as victory.

“Oh-ho-ho-ho-ho! What do we have here? Proof that your snares were not in Lloyd’s heart in any way, shape, level, or degree!”

Phyllo nodded.

“.....In conclusion, Lloyd is mine.”

She’d chosen this moment to stake a claim of her own.

Selen’s expression flipped upside down.

“Phylloooooo! I won’t stand by while you distort the facts so calmly!”

“.....Only I can be Lloyd’s princess because I’m the only real princess here.”

“Technically, yes, because you’re a princess of Rokujou! But don’t assume that benefits you in this context!”

Phyllo joining the fray had Lloyd’s head spinning.

It’s a three-way brawl?! Selen thought Phyllo was an ally, only for a last-minute betrayal! What a brilliant strategy, no, maneuver! This is politics in action!

He thought this was all part of the imaginary war of succession. Since he wasn’t saying any of it out loud, no one could stop his increasing number of misunderstandings!

Phyllo’s a Rokujou princess, but that’s not enough! She wants both crowns and is gunning for Azami’s, too! Amazing...or is it?

Even he was starting to think this sounded a bit weird.

Being the princess of two countries, managing both duties, was a ridiculous venture beyond even the most accomplished veteran.

If one part of a theory feels wrong, people start to doubt the whole thing. Especially if you are easily manipulated like Lloyd. He was starting to think it was odd that there would be a princess battle royale at all, much less that Selen would suddenly be after the crown.

Yeah, that doesn't make sense. She's never mentioned anything like that. And if the strongest candidate gets the throne...the king doesn't seem very strong...

Mounting evidence and warning signs do matter. You can't just suddenly show emotional moments or scenes of personal growth and expect the audience to eat it up. You gotta build up to it.

As he extracted himself from the flow of false assumptions and showed signs of growth, Riho regained her composure.

"Wait, Lloyd, you keep talking about the princess—why?"

She glared at him, and he started fidgeting. He'd raised her expectations but then shot her down, so she was definitely out for payback.

"Um...so you really *aren't* the Princess of Azami, Riho? I was told she's good at magic, foul-mouthed, but kind-hearted, so I just assumed..."

This explanation allowed Selen and Phyllo to realize the meaning behind his words had been literal, not figurative. They lowered their fists.

"What's this?"

".....You were looking for the *real* princess?"

"Well, Riho *is* good at magic."

".....And the rough front hides a heart of gold. I saw her feeding a lost cat. Just as she had it tamed, the owner showed up, and she gave it a hug. She seemed happy and sad at the same time."

This mystery anecdote had Riho clapping her hands over Phyllo's mouth.

"You're giving too many details! Don't rat me out!"

"Your underhanded attempts to rack up good will won't work on me, Riho!"

Riho cleared her throat, moved back to her starting position, and turned to Lloyd once more.

“So I get where and how this mess got started, but...why do you care about the princess now?”

“Uh, that...I can’t really say. It’s complicated.”

Lloyd looked very shifty. He’d been trying to find her before the ball so he could let her down gently; he didn’t want to shame her in front of his friends, either.

All three women narrowed their eyes. The mood was swiftly turning to one found in an interrogation room. Selen took the lead.

“Well, if you say so, we’ll forget the whole thing.”

A shocking betrayal! The others objected.

“Wait, Selen?!”

“.....You don’t care?”

She flashed them a *you don’t get it* grin. This was very obnoxious.

“Oh, I always care. But I have faith in Sir Lloyd. You’ll be just fine, won’t you?”

He nodded.

“I’ve got this! I wouldn’t do anything treasonous!” (Toward the Azami Kingdom.)

“See? Sir Lloyd could never commit an act of treachery.” (...Against Selen.)

The others spotted the difference.

“.....This isn’t adding up.”

“But getting things wrong *is* their forte.”

“Um, Riho, I’m very sorry I got you involved in this mix-up.”

“Uh, well...don’t worry about it.”

Lloyd bowed and left.

Riho was a bit sad to learn it hadn’t been a date, but the search for the

princess was still bothering her.

“If I *was* the princess, where would he have taken it next? It felt like...”

Something romance-related. But she didn’t say that aloud. Instead, she shook her head, trying to drive the thought away.

“What’s wrong? Fantasizing about Sir Lloyd?”

“Hell no. I’m not you.”

“.....Really?”

What would they do if they found out Lloyd might date the princess? Find out next time!

Lloyd got back from the restaurant, ready to finally relax.

“Welcome *home*,” Marie growled, the second he stepped in.

“Hi...Marie?”

She had her arms folded like a wife who had caught her husband out all night philandering. She’d been normal when he left, so this left him baffled.

What was this about? Well, let’s roll back the clock a bit—our second time today, but bear with me.

Lloyd had gotten changed and headed out for his meeting with Riho.

Marie had seen him all dressed up and had grown suspicious. She never gave a hoot about her own clothes, but was very observant when it came to others’.

“Where you going, Lloyd?”

“N-nowhere. Just...dinner. To learn about new dishes to make!”

She could tell he was talking quite fast. The moment he left, she put out feelers. Word arrived he and a girl had disappeared from a nice restaurant on the North Side, and she’d been hovering around the door ever since.

“I have eyes all over town—all over this country! Don’t you ever forget that.”

Mostly older barflies and gossipy biddies, but she had him dead to rights. Though he hadn’t actually done anything wrong, he looked as guilty as any two-bit crook on the hot seat.

“Time you explained yourself! Gallivanting around the nighttime streets! You naughty boy!”

“Er, actually—”

Having the East Side’s foremost info broker and secret savior of the kingdom (this was his misconception) staring him down was very intimidating.

Realizing he wouldn’t be able to worm out of this, Lloyd told Marie all about his situation involving the princess. That the king was trying to hook him and the princess up, and use their dance at the ball to lure the princess back to the castle.

“First I’ve heard of it, *Dad.*”

“Huh?”

“.....Please, tell me more.”

This was all coming as quite a surprise to the princess in question.

“I guess it would come as a shock. If I wound up seeing the princess, given her status, I probably couldn’t keep living here.”

Never good at keeping secrets, Lloyd spilled all the beans.

“——So I was asking around, trying to figure out what she’s like. Hoping to at least meet her before we have to dance together.”

Marie had spent the whole conversation equally divided between thinking *Good plan, Dad,* and *How dare you!*

Now Lloyd has the princess on his mind...but hearing someone you’ve never even met has feelings for you is just weird. Like your boss introducing you to his daughter.

That would certainly get your mind going.

“I did my best to find out stuff, and one source said she was good at magic, and had a foul mouth but was actually a nice person.”

“Foul-mouthed, my ass.”

“Huh?”

“.....Please, continue.”

It wasn't exactly *wrong*.

“But that's really all I know. So I thought about it and thought about it...”

“Mm-hmm.”

“And convinced myself Riho must be the princess. So I met up with her to make sure.’

“Why in the heck?!” Marie wailed.

To the actual princess, this conclusion was just horrifying.

Lloyd was extra-baffled but pressed on.

“If she really was the princess, it would never do to take her somewhere shabby, so I picked an upscale restaurant...”

“But since you look quite tired, I assume Selen and Phyllo wound up chasing you around?”

“Exactly. Turns out Riho isn't the princess, anyway. I'm back to square one.”

Marie thought this over.

He's too close to me to ever make that connection. Even though it's right under his nose.

In this case, however, that probably didn't apply. Marie was busy ignoring her own utter lack of princess-like qualities, rationalizing this with all her might.

“Lloyd, I understand your reasoning now. Since you've done nothing wrong, we're good.”

“Th-thank you.”

“But what about this princess? Do you have any interest in her?”

“No, I was planning on turning her down.”

“Aw, that's a shame. She is royalty! I'd go for it, personally. Just my take.”

Ulterior motives in full force. Her take? It's more of a snatch-and-grab act.

“But that would mean... No, I'd better go change.”

With that unfinished thought, Lloyd headed to his room.

Marie watched him leave, her arms folded.

“Marrying a princess is clearly too much for him,” she muttered.

Was that all this was? It felt like there was some other factor here.

“What would he think if he found out I was the princess? Argh, anyway, first I’ve gotta go interrogate Chrome—I bet he knew all about this and kept it from me. Time I got to the bottom of things.”

My condolences, Chrome.

Hoping against hope this would lead to her getting somewhere with Lloyd, Marie flared her nostrils, then raced off into the night in search of Chrome.

The square-jawed colonel was exhausted, worn out from Marie’s midnight third-degree interrogation. He had work in the morning, but her questions wouldn’t end, and as a result, couldn’t get a wink of sleep. Meanwhile, Marie’s shop opened when she felt like it, so she was happily sleeping in.

“Yo, you look extra tuckered out, Chrome.”

“That obvious, Choline?”

“Those dark circles speak volumes. You’re on the brink of death! What happened?!”

Chrome glumly explained the king’s plans for the ball, and how Marie had been on the warpath about it. He felt like he was a victim getting interviewed on TV with his face blurred.

“Yikes. The plan alone is bad enough, but she found out?!”

“Yeah. She hammered on my door in the middle of the night, going on and on about how I should be telling her these things to let her get mentally prepared.”

“So she’s on board with it on principle? That’s nice! Even our princess needs that push sometimes.”

“If she’d been dead set against it, I’d have been caught between her and the king, trying to broker a compromise. I don’t even wanna *think* about that...”

This was like when part-time staffers were opposed to new company policies,

and the middle manager had to wade into the fray to get *somebody* to yield. The manager understood both why the new guidelines could improve workflow efficiency and why the actual workers would object to any change in their day-to-day routine. Consequently, they bore the brunt of the fallout.

But before Chrome could even settle into his seat, in came Micona, a huge bundle of documents in her arms.

“Hang in there, Colonel Chrome. I’ve got the data you requested.”

“Oh, thanks.”

He listlessly took it from her, and her frown deepened.

“You’re clearly barely holding it together.”

“I’ll pull through. Just got mixed up in someone else’s family problems.”

“Ah. Well, I have a question for you. I’m looking for the Azami princess. Do you have any idea where she is?”

This timing was actually pretty apt, but he just sighed.

“Where’s this coming from?”

“I have my reasons. And a need to locate her swiftly.”

Sensing danger in her gaze, he did his best to wriggle out of it.

“No clue.”

“Really? You, the former head of the royal guard?”

Her eyes gleamed. Choline stepped in to help.

“The king didn’t want to let any old *man* know where his teenage daughter is! First and foremost, he’s a father, after all.”

“That does sound like a dad thing to do...”

Micona nodded, and Chrome fought back the urge to protest this allegation.

“Course, I dunno, either. What with the whole Abaddon thing, she’s hidden somewhere he can trust.”

Micona raised an eyebrow at this lie, but chose not to dig further.

“If you’ll excuse me,” she said, bowing and taking her leave.

The threat had passed, but the circles under Chrome’s eyes were that much darker.

“One thing after another... What’s going on here? I’ve got enough on my plate with the guilds.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t be clutching your head over anything else but the issue with the Maritime Guild. Are they still refusing to show up to the ball?”

Chrome shot her a *don’t pin that all on my shoulders* glare.

“Yeah, no response to our letters. Merthophan feels responsible, so he said he’d go in person.”

“Oh,” Choline said, nodding gravely. “Chrome, do you know *why* they’re being so uncooperative?”

“Mm? Uh...”

“You said it wasn’t about Abaddon. So this ain’t on Merthophan. There’s no need for him to go bow his head.”

Chrome checked to see if anyone was within earshot, then revealed the truth.

“Actually, guild captain Fumar Ketoshifen used to be a soldier. He was friends with the king. And close with him. You know that much, at least?”

“Yep, heard it secondhand, but sure. Same age, often worked together hunting monsters, or sneaking off into town.”

Fumar may have been less a best friend and more of a bad influence.

Chrome nodded. “This doesn’t leave the room,” he said. “But I got curious after our previous discussion and contacted the previous head royal guard, Coba. The truth caught me by surprise.”

“You’ve got my attention. You should be a lawyer.”

Choline was leaning in, and Chrome spoke in measured tones for dramatic effect.

“They were very close, despite the difference in their backgrounds. But perhaps they were too similar.”

“Meaning...?”

“They thought alike,” Chrome said, getting to the point. “So alike they had the same taste in women. Both men fell for the same lady!”

“Gasp! That’s it?!”

“That wasn’t the direct cause. From what I’ve heard, Fumar knew his place in the world and let the king make the first move. And the lady herself said, ‘Hey, life is long, might as well try out the whole royalty thing,’ and married his majesty, becoming his queen.”

“That’s like, a really messed-up reason to marry anyone.”

“Mind your words, that’s our queen you’re talking about. But yeah, I hear she was quite the free spirit. In time, Princess Maria was born, and Fumar celebrated with them both.”

“So where’d it go wrong?”

“Shortly after the princess was born, the queen disappeared.”

Not a word you could use lightly. Choline nearly fell off her chair.

“Disappeared?! Isn’t that like, a huge deal?! I swore I heard she was dead.”

“Apparently she left a note that said, *Heading out to distant lands, thanks for everything.*”

“That sounds almost like suicide...I can see why there was a fallout.”

Chrome nodded, and relayed the rest of what Cobra had told him.

“The king looked everywhere. Cobra took responsibility and left his post, wandering the world in search of her. You could argue he even became hotel owner in hopes that would help locate the queen.”

“That explains it... Always seemed like a strange career choice for a former guard.”

“There are places you can’t search as part of the Azami army. And that applied to Fumar, too.”

That was why he’d become a man of the sea. It was all adding up for Choline.

“That’s why Fumar left the service?”

“Yeah, from his point of view, he’d stifled his own feelings, only for the king to drive the love of his life to...what could certainly be taken as suicide. It’s all too easy to imagine him feeling betrayed, furious at the king and filled with regret.”

“Would this have happened if he’d married her instead? Anyone would find themselves wondering.”

“So he gathered up men he trusted, and left the army. Founded the Maritime Guild—like Coba with his hotel, all so he could search for her. He and his men were all rank and file who’d earned their way to the top, and their guild grew explosively.”

“That would explain it. We’ve all got history, huh... Mm?”

As Choline spoke, there was a *thunk* in the hall.

“What was that?”

“Hmm. Can’t hear anyone—something must have fallen over.”

They listened for signs of motion, and then resumed the conversation.

“Then Abaddon possessed the king and the princess vanished, which just made things worse between them. They haven’t spoken since, and he’s clearly not open to patching things up.”

“Half the reason he wants Princess Maria at this ball is to show Fumar she’s alive and well, huh?”

“She’s certainly doing well. In my ear all night—half of which was just fantasizing about marrying Lloyd, then stopping to yell at me some more. An endless loop.”

“Dangling that possibility in front of her would be tempting. But she can’t be that thrilled about the king’s plan to force her out of her comfort zone and back into the castle full time. Anyone would wanna gripe a bit. If you live anywhere for a couple of years, you get to know the neighbors.”

“For now, we’re gonna have to let Merthophan handle the Maritime Guild. If we had word on the queen’s whereabouts, maybe things would change, but...”

Chrome got to his feet. He had work to do. Choline stretched, and reached for her lesson plan.

“That noise didn’t sound like something falling,” she muttered. “Maybe it was someone eavesdropping? Nah, couldn’t be.”

She got up, and headed off to class.

But someone *had* been eavesdropping on their secret conversation.

“Captain Fumar and the king were once friends...”

Micon. Always one to put her shoulder to it when she had a goal in mind (in this case, hooking Lloyd up with the princess to pry him away from Marie), she’d been listening closely. By combining the powers of Abaddon with the treant demon lord, she’d extended her vines, using the slightest of vibrations in the air to pick up what they were saying. All traces of humanity and morality left behind.

The vines slithered back into her arm like a retractable vacuum machine cord, her grin widening.

“They seemed like they knew things, so I listened in... Gasp! Wait!”

She’d started putting the pieces together.

“Maybe they left the princess with the Maritime Guild—that would be a good safe haven! The daughter of the woman he loved? Even with bad blood between them, he couldn’t say no. They spend most of their time out at sea, journeying between countries. Tough to track. Good plan, Your Majesty.”

Impressive! She’d gotten everything wrong.

Finished with her deductions, she turned her gaze to the sky, smiling as if she’d just got off work.

“Even if that theory is wrong, it’ll be Lloyd Belladonna pounding the pavement. I’ll just go give him the information. All for my future with Marie!”

Except Marie *was* the princess.

But however wrong she might be, Micon went skipping back to Lloyd, humming a merry tune. Never realizing she’d missed the most important part

entirely.

If she'd heard the conclusion, even she might not have messed this up.

Back to Lloyd's side of things. The day after his "date" with Riho, his friends all looked distinctly uncomfortable.

Allan alone had had no part in the mess and so was left scratching his head.

"What's going on, Lloyd? Why are those two in that formation?"

Selen and Phyllo were using a front and follow tactic, moving to keep Riho at a safe distance.

"To take precautions, we're creating boundaries. One Four Zero Zero, all clear."

".....All clear, over."

Riho punched her desk, fuming.

"You guys lost it! Why are you treating me like some sort of target?!"

"Selen here, located suspicious princess pretender, advising caution."

".....Roger that, ensuring princess pretender crosses no lines, over."

Phyllo gave her the look you reserved for a pitiful child, and Riho gnashed her teeth. Allan shook his head at their antics.

"I feel bad for you, Lloyd."

"No, this is all started— Well, it's my fault."

"Sir Lloyd! I am prepared to be your princess any time you ask."

".....Gimme a love letter anytime."

Allan assumed that this was another of Selen's delusional escapades and Phyllo was just along for the ride.

"Let me say it again: I feel bad for you, Lloyd."

He slapped Lloyd on the back.

"My! If it isn't the usual crew, thick as thieves!"

Micono came skipping in.

“What’s going on, Micona? If you’re skipping and humming, something delightful must have happened!”

“.....Is skipping the new normal?”

Selen and Micona were old stalker buddies, and Phyllo distanced herself quickly.

They both completely ignored her. Micona already had an arm firmly over Lloyd’s shoulders.

“Assume it is. I’m here to borrow Lloyd Belladonna.”

“Very well. Anything to keep him away from Riho.”

“.....Return him in due course.”

“Lloyd Belladonna’s mess fell on you again, Riho Flavin?” Micona sighed.

She was starting to develop a nose for these things.

“I’m reduced to having to receive sympathy from *Micona*,” Riho wailed.

“I’d usually take issue with that, but I’m short on time. Come, Lloyd.”

“Er, Micona...?! ”

She grabbed him and beat a swift retreat.

A few minutes later, Lloyd was deposited on a bench on the landing of the school stairs, free at last.

“M-Micona, what’s this about?”

“What else would it be about? The search for the princess.”

Very much a “Be grateful, I’m helping” attitude. Very Micona.

“Oh! Thanks.”

Lloyd thanked her anyway, because he was nice.

“Did you find her?”

“No, but I have a lead.”

“You do?! ” Lloyd gasped.

Micona grinned. “Yes. Have you heard of the Maritime Guild?”

She told him everything she'd heard while eavesdropping. This included several "I assume" and "Probably" statements that were pure speculation and wild flights of fancy, but she sounded utterly certain of all of it.

"Odds are the Maritime Guild is harboring her, then."

"I'm nearly sure of it," Micona said emphatically. Talking about her own conjecture had convinced her it was the truth.

"Well, it's at least worth looking into. But where do I find them?"

"Hmm, that I don't know. I could go check?"

"No, thanks. I'll handle the rest myself."

"Very well. I'll check other leads."

She turned to leave, but Lloyd stopped her.

"Um, Micona."

"Yes?"

"Thanks for everything."

".....I'm doing this for myself. And—" She let out a sigh. "It's an upperclassman's duty to help out where an underclassman falls short. Not that you're doing much of that lately."

Hearing the compliment, Lloyd beamed.

"Good to hear! And thanks!"

A quick resolution but...the princess wasn't at the Maritime Guild, and Micona was doing this entirely for her own selfish ends.

"I wish you luck."

Micona sailed off, waving a hand. Lloyd thanked her yet again.

"The Maritime Guild," he whispered. "Okay! I'll ask about them at the Adventurer Guild."

His mind made up, he turned down the girls' lunch invite and set out in search of information.

The ladies were left having lunch without Lloyd.

“Sir Lloyd declined my invite!”

“.....We all have our bad days.”

Phyllo was busy rubbing Selen’s back.

“No big deal! He had stuff to take care of. Time to heal our suffering, which is why Allan’s paying,” Riho said.

“Wait, what? Now I’m the one suffering!” Allan spluttered.

Then Merthophan appeared, looming over them.

“You lot are always so loud.”

There was no sign of his usual loincloth—the combination of those two words was, itself, problematic. Today he was in a crisp military uniform.

“Oh, Merthophan. Getting lunch?”

“Yes, best I eat my fill before my next task. What of it?”

“.....Good timing.”

The looks on Riho and Phyllo’s faces told him everything, and he rubbed his temples.

“You want me to pay for your meals? And if I say no, you’ll force that on Allan. Fine!”

Consent secured, Riho pumped a fist.

“Make it something good!”

“I’ve got work to do, so it won’t be fancy—but I guarantee the flavor.”

Allan sensed Merthophan was acting different than usual.

“By work, you mean something big, huh? A monster hunt?”

Allan looked a bit nervous. He still wasn’t great with those.

But Merthophan just snorted.

“Don’t sound so nervous, Allan. You’re the Azami army’s great hope. No, I’m just dropping in on one of the guilds. Care to join me? It could prove educational.”

Allan was relieved to hear monsters weren't involved. If he'd been asked to help in return for lunch, he'd have done his level best to back out.

"A guild? Don't mind if I do."

"You're so obvious, Allan. But I'll go anywhere for free food!" Riho said, rubbing her hands together.

".....Nothing more costly than free," Phyllo muttered.

"Don't be ridiculous, Phyllo," Riho snapped. "Trust in the gospel of free. Free saves the faithful."

She'd founded a religion. Even Selen thought that was a bit much.

"When she gets like this, Riho does *not* listen to reason."

"Money-hungry ex-merc..."

Allan, you've forgotten about your own shameful display of gaffing.

"Settled? Then let's go. It should prove invaluable."

"Invaluable, is it? That's gotta be some amazing meal!"

Free food had Riho all fired up—which she would live to regret.

Meanwhile, Lloyd had reached the Adventurer Guild.

He was here to find out how to get an appointment with the captain of the Maritime Guild, Fumar Ketoshifen. He strode right through the front doors to the reception desk.

"Hello, I have a question."

"Hng? We're not the city map—eek!"

The adventurer at the desk had scars on his face, and had clearly been through his share of hell. Except one look at Lloyd's face and he went white as a sheet, yelping aloud.

"L-Lloyd! What brings you here, good sir?"

He must have been one of the men who'd witnessed the window incident. He seemed very frightened.

"Um, I had a question for the guild master. Is this a good time?"

“I-I think it will be! I’ll convince her to make time. I swear on my life! Just talk amongst yourselves!”

There was no one for Lloyd to talk to, so that was odd, but he was already running up the stairs. Fear had made him talk nonsense.

He frantically waved Lloyd after him, escorting him as if he was an extremely important VIP. He tripped and said, “Please, watch your step.”

“Same to you,” Lloyd said, wincing.

They were soon at the office on the top floor. Like last time, they went across the training room floor to the office-like reception corner. The place was filled with tough-looking adventurers.

But unlike then—

“Welcome, Big Bro Lloyd!”

They slapped their hands to their knees, bent their backs, and bowed. Even Proxy Master Katsu Kondou had his head low to the ground, like a scene from a yakuza movie.

“You honor us with your presence.”

“Big Bro?!”

None of the men looked like regular civilians, and they were all older than him (Katsu was in his late forties) so being called that as if he were a senior yakuza was certainly alarming.

Katsu had bowed so deeply his black-framed glasses had begun sliding off. Adjusting them, he insisted, “You’ve earned the title. The guild master told us of your exploits, and we feel ashamed of ourselves for failing to perceive your true skill.”

“But I haven’t done anything that deserves to be called ‘exploits’...”

Everything he’d done was perfectly normal for anyone from Kunlun.

But that was seen as modesty.

“I did some research on you, Lloyd!” a cheery voice called.

Rinko was sprawled out on the couch, combing through files, as casual as if

she was reading a newspaper.

She sat up with a grunt and stretched, reading from one of her documents.

“Lloyd Belladonna. Entered the Azami Military Academy this year via exceptional admission. Good at cooking, cleaning, and housework. Friendly with East Side residents, back-alley types, and black-market merchants. Has gained unwavering trust not just on the East Side, but also from merchants and restauraners across Azami. His knack for domesticity and his pleasant personality appears to have earned their faith...”

At this point, she switched to a different document.

“Rumor has it his true ability is beyond amazing. At the Student Sorcery Tournament, most assumed his opponent blew herself up, but other reports insist that it was his spell. It was he who drew the Holy Sword, and he was directly responsible for resolving the treant cultivation incident... The stories continue, and I bet they’re all true.”

“Er, I don’t know about any holy swords...”

“You didn’t even realize!” Rinko chuckled. “I looked through the last few years of Azami history, and it’s really something. The sheer number of incidents and near disasters!”

Then she pointed at Lloyd, grinning like a detective IDing the culprit.

“And I had feeling you’d be right at the center of them all. Excellent deduction, Rinko, if I do say so myself.”

“I’m not sure what disasters you’re referring to, but I’ve certainly been mixed up in all kinds of things. And it’s helped me grow!”

“Hmm, an honest boy who doesn’t realize his true strength. You just keep getting more and more interesting!”

Unsure what that meant, Lloyd bowed his head and thanked her.

Rinko looked him over and muttered under her breath, too soft for anyone to hear, “When he’s done growing, we can advance *that* project...”

But putting that aside, she inquired about his visit.

“So, what brings you here today?”

“Oh! Yes. I wanted to ask about the Maritime Guild. How would I go about seeing Captain Fumar? I figured someone here would know.”

“Oh?” Proxy Master Katsu looked grim. “That’s a tall order. He has it in for the Azami army.”

“So I heard?”

“In our line of work, everyone knows to never mention the army in front of Captain Fumar. Because—”

But before he could say another word, Rinko slapped his shoulder.

“Kacchin, you talk too much.”

She must have hit pretty hard, because he staggered, then apologized.

“I-I beg your pardon.”

That exchange baffled Lloyd, but he didn’t dwell on it.

“Oww.” Katsu fought back tears, and continued. “He spends most of his time out at sea, sailing from country to country. Even if you located him, it would be a tall order for a soldier to secure an appointment.”

“So even if I find him, he’ll just turn me away at the door.”

Lloyd hung his head.

“I bet,” Rinko said. “But what business do you have with Captain Fumar?”

“I’m trying to find the princess. And since he was close to the king once, I thought he might know something. He might even be the one keeping her safe.”

“The princess? What a fascinating twist of fate. When Luke was possessed by the demon lord, Fumar might well have given up on him, and taken her into his care. Kacchin.”

Rinko shot Katsu a *Do something!* look. He nodded wordlessly, and gave Lloyd what information he had.

“First, head to the South Side.”

“And...?”

“Fumar is the head of an international guild. Locating him is a major undertaking. But the Maritime Guild themselves are always active, loading and unloading freight. You should find their rank and file at the bar closest to the wharf.”

“Drinking after work... And if I ask the guild members there, they’ll help me find Fumar?”

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy, Big Bro, but I’m sure you’ll find a way. May luck be on your side.”

“Thank you, Katsu, Rinko.”

“No big deal,” Rinko laughed, wagging her fingers at him. “If you find the princess, lemme know—I got business with her, too.”

“Certainly,” Lloyd said, smiling warmly. He bowed, and turned to go. “I’ve got a solid lead! I know lots of people in the bars along South Side—hopefully I’ll find one!”

He left the Adventurer Guild feeling like he’d made real progress.

Rinko watched him go from the top floor window.

“I doubt the princess is actually with Captain Fumar,” Katsu said.

“We shouldn’t assume,” she replied. “But I admit, imagining what’ll happen when that boy catches up with Fumar *is* bringing a smile to my lips.”

She had a mischievous grin, like someone handing a friend a jack-in-the-box.

Back to Merthophan and the girls.

They’d been eating lunch together while Lloyd was doing legwork at the Adventurer Guild.

“This shop serves rice cooked in earthenware pots, with plenty of organic vegetables! In the evening, it becomes an upscale pub, but lunch is quite reasonable.”

“It’s good!”

“Especially these crunchy lotus roots! The fish stock really brings out the

natural—”

“.....More.”

He’s paying; at least let him wax poetic about it.

Selen was heaping spicy fish eggs on her rice and gulping it down.

“You’re sure you don’t mind? Things are reasonably priced here, but with so many of us, it adds up. You could always make Allan pay for himself.”

“Mmph! Why would you even suggest that?!” Allan wailed, spraying his rice topped with simple scrambled eggs everywhere.

Merthophan took a sip of tea, managing to make that gesture seem meaningful.

“Given where we’re headed next, the expense is worth it. Can’t fight on an empty stomach.”

“Fight...? I thought we were just dropping in on a guild. If this place is trouble...”

Riho’s voice rose in alarm. She’d figured it out.

Merthophan nodded, like a man bound for the front.

“Indeed. The Maritime Guild.”

Once they finished their meal, they headed to a warehouse managed by said guild.

Large wooden boxes, piles of cargo, and the loud voices of working men. Their military uniforms earned them glares from every direction.

“W-wow, this is intense. They’re even more hostile than the Adventurer Guild.”

“.....And not because we’re disrupting work.”

“What did we ever do to them?”

“I’ve heard there was bad blood between them and the army, but this is worse than I imagined.”

They were still in a tizzy when a guild member headed their way. He was in

work pants and shirt, with a bandana wrapped round his head—the spitting image of a “sea dog.”

“What brings the Azami army here?” he growled.

“Merthophan Dextro, agricultural advisor to the Azami army. I’ve got an appointment. Can you lead us to Fumar Ketoshifen?”

The man grunted noncommittally and led them further in.

The warehouse was filled to the brim with cargo. Light spilled in from the entrance, but not much made it this far back; if this was a movie, you’d expect to find mobsters interrogating someone.

The cadets hadn’t done anything that would warrant an interrogation, but it sure felt as if they were going to get one anyway.

An older man was in the back, sitting on a wooden box, his arms folded.

He had on a red bandana to tie back his locks of hair, and his eyes shone like daggers. He wore boots and a loose-fitting coat—the spitting image of a maritime captain. Or rather, a pirate.

“Is he the guild leader?”

“Yeah, Captain Fumar: the man the Azami economy depends upon. Without him, the kingdom would have collapsed a long time ago.”

“.....And he’s got no openings. He’s something, all right.”

Fumar ignored the whispering girls completely, his eyes locked on the man in front of him.

“So you’re Merthophan?” he spat. His voice came out in a low growl, like a mob boss ready for battle. It was the kind of voice that made you pick your words *very* carefully.

“I am. Merthophan Dextro, agricultural advisor to the Azami army. These cadets are students of mine at the academy.”

“Well, I didn’t say to come alone, so no matter.”

He looked them each over in turn, then pointed at the bag in Merthophan’s hands.

“Citrus fruits and top-quality lime juice, necessary for long voyages. With our compliments.”

Fumar took the bag, and sniffed the contents, holding the bottle up to the light.

“Good color and odor. Happy to accept. Stow these on my ship!”

A guild crew member nodded, took the gift, and ran off. Classic boss and henchman interaction.

“Are all the guilds like this?” Selen whispered.

Coming here straight from the Adventurer Guild would make you wonder.

“Just these two,” Riho assured her.

Fumar gave them a sidelong glance, then turned to Merthophan.

“So what’s with your crew? Every one of them’s too strong to call a cadet.”

Merthophan introduced each in turn, and Fumar sounded impressed.

“I’ve heard the word. This year got some good ’uns—the four of you, mm?”

Fumar’s smile got a tad friendlier. A glimpse of the kind heart underneath eased their tension considerably.

“But are these kids planning on leaving the army and coming to work for me? Yeah, I didn’t think so.”

Fumar scratched his chin, eyes back on Merthophan.

“I merely thought seeing this would be good experience for them,” he said. “As a former instructor, and the man inadvertently responsible for nearly toppling the kingdom, I have a duty to do what I can for them.”

The air crackled. Fumar narrowed his eyes.

“Let’s get to the point. Is this about your silly little ball?”

“You’ve heard already, then?”

“You sent me a letter! How could I miss it?”

“Then let’s cut to the chase.”

Merthophan took a step forward, bowing his head low.

“It is my fault the king took leave of his senses, and pushed for a pointless war. A demon lord took advantage of my grudge against Jiou and sowed turmoil within the army and palace. The army and king are the victims here, and all blame falls squarely on my shoulders. Do what you will with me, but I implore you to let the strife between the army and the guild be water under the bridge and attend the ball.”

He was clearly ready to put his own neck on the line, and his students were rather taken aback.

“That’s going a bit far, Merthophan!”

“.....Self-sacrifice?”

Fumar pulled out a cigar, lit it, and took a long drag.

Smoke curled up toward the ceiling, and he savored the flavor a moment before speaking.

“Raise your head, boy.”

He rolled the cigar to the side of his mouth before continuing.

“I got no use for your head. Keep it.”

“Captain, like Colonel Merthophan said, it’s a fact the king was under the possession of a demon lord. I can attest to that,” Allan said.

Fumar snorted. “I knew that much already, big lug.”

He filled his lungs with smoke and exhaled it in a snarl of rage. The guild members in earshot shivered, as if they’d heard the bellow of a dragon.

“I ain’t mad ‘cause Luke tried to start some stupid war. It’s his damn country, and he can do what he wants with it. That’s all on him.”

Luke.

The cadets were shocked to hear anyone call the king by his first name.

“Wow,” Allan whispered, wiping a drop of sweat from his jaw. “Dropping all titles! Captain Fumar’s not just putting on airs.”

It really drove home that they were talking to a living legend, the man who'd made the city what it was.

Selen had a very different take.

"Really? It sounds more like he's talking crap about an old war buddy."

"We're not *buddies*, Belt Princess. I'm just saying it ain't the war I'm pissed about."

".....Then what?" Phyllo asked.

"Damn ye, if you ask that outright, now I gotta answer. You got gumption."

Fumar shot her a grin like he was spinning a yarn for his grandkid.

"I'm mad 'cause that lily-livered fool of a king couldn't even keep one dame safe. Once..."

He told them how he and the king had fallen for the same woman, and he'd removed himself from the picture.

"I had no idea!"

"It's too late to regret it, but regret it I do. Not knowing what happened to the woman I loved, not even knowing if she's alive or dead. If I knew where she was resting, I could at least offer some flowers in her memory."

He dropped the cigar on the floor in a flash of anger and ground it beneath his boot.

"I started this guild, searching for her while I worked, and he just let everyone think she was dead. And then got himself possessed by a demon lord?! Gimme a break."

"That was for the sake of the princess!" Merthophan roared. He was reeling from all this new information, but on that point he stood firm.

But Fumar was having none of it.

"Spare me the excuses. You let that snotnose know I ain't coming to no ball, and I ain't following your damn orders. You want a war with Jiou, knock yerself out."

"But—"

“Get out. We’re done talking.”

Merthophan kept flapping his lips, but Selen and Phyllo each tugged a sleeve.

“Colonel Merthophan, this is not the time.”

“.....Mm.”

They dragged him out of the warehouse.

“It’s partly my fault the search for the queen was called off. If I hadn’t been under that demon lord’s control, perhaps—”

“No time for maybes, Merthophan. He’s not willing to listen.”

“These waters run deep. He may not look it, but that man had the heart of a romantic.”

“.....You *would* say that.”

The students’ typical banter helped Merthophan get back on his feet.

“Sorry,” he said, mustering a smile. “I lost my composure there.”

Allan shook his head. “Nah, don’t worry about it. Captain Fumar sure has one hard head!”

“Regret over letting a loved one go—I sympathize. I must do everything in my power not to repeat his mistake.”

“Y-Yeah...within reason, please?”

Nobody here wanted Selen getting even more determined. Merthophan had brought them here to meet a renowned predecessor, not provide stalker inspiration. He gave her a pained look as they made their way back.

That evening, Lloyd was on the South Side, looking for the bar the Adventurer Guild had told him about.

The South Side had many stalls serving classic street food: deep fried foods, seafood kebabs, shellfish cooked in their shells, and stir-fried noodles. Lloyd had regularly made the rounds to improve his own cooking and had visited many bars during the day. But he was still underage, and thus had never seen them during the peak evening rush.

“This bar is closest to the wharf.”

“Bwa-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Sounds of revelry surrounded Lloyd. As he neared the bar, he saw dock workers walking through the doors, and voices raised in merriment (or readying for a fight) streaming out. They were here to drink, not eat; the menu was filled with fish and chips or other salty snacks to keep the drink orders coming. Both food and drink menus were extremely long.

“Mm, looks like the right place.”

Slightly daunted by the volume, Lloyd nonetheless picked his way to the counter.

“Welc—oh, if it isn’t Lloyd. A bit late for you!”

The bartender, who was also the proprietor, recognized him at once and approached him, looking surprised.

“It’s been far too long,” Lloyd said.

“Uh, I don’t remember asking you for help with anything, not since that last fish delivery.”

“Oh, no, I’m actually here—”

But before Lloyd could say another word, a guttural laugh echoed from the largest table.

“Har-har-har, boy, this isn’t a place for the likes of you.”

“Go on home and drink yer mama’s milk!”

“Dude, that’s a lazy cliché, at least put a spin on it.”

“Bwa-ha-ha! If you see a kid in a dive bar like this, you can’t help yourself.”

Thick biceps with anchors tattooed on them, laughing with beer bottles in hand. They were clearly men of the sea and clearly responsible for the bulk of the bar’s noise.

Figuring this was who he was looking for, Lloyd approached them.

“Are you with the Maritime Guild?”

“So what if I am?” The man guffawed again. “You gonna buy a round?”

“I’m trying to locate Captain Fumar,” Lloyd explained. “Could you tell me where he is?”

That earned Lloyd the biggest laugh yet.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Are you *drunk*?!”

“No, I haven’t touched a drop.”

“Captain Fumar don’t have time to chat with kids! Who do you think you are?”

“Lloyd Belladonna. Head of the first years at Azami Military Academy.”

The laughter died down instantly. Every last man turned and glared at him.

“Then there ain’t no way,” one man growled, taking a swig from his bottle.

“Please, I need—”

But two strong-armed men blocked his path, each as big as Allan, and so tall it hurt Lloyd’s neck to look up at them.

“We don’t give a damn about your problems. If you don’t wanna get hurt, get yer ass outta here.”

They cracked their knuckles, ready to fight at any moment. The rest of the guild members got to their feet, backing them up.

The bar owner decided things had gone far enough and stepped in.

“Gentlemen, please.”

“Sorry, but this one’s on the boy. Any soldier who dares to speak to us has got it coming.”

The barkeep stuck to his guns.

“No, I mean if you don’t want to get hurt, better back down now.”

That earned him a chorus of guffaws.

“Har-har-har, you’ve lost it, barkeep! Sipping too much of your own booze?”

He swept his eyes grimly across the soldiers’ faces.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been back in Azami?”

“We were at Rokujou for a while—six months or so?”

“I figured. You genuinely don’t know—Lloyd here is a legend.”

His words, especially the last one, made jaws dropped.

“Mm? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Why’s *he* looking so surprised?!” another customer laughed, glass in hand.

“That’s our Lloyd, though!”

“True that. He does all kinds of crazy stunts and never even notices!”

Table after table joined the chorus, and the guild members all appeared extra confused.

The whole bar seemed to have Lloyd’s back, and they were clearly the minority here.

“What, are you all in on this? Did you form some sorta street theater group?”

“It all began six months ago—”

“Barkeep! Don’t you dare start reminiscing!”

But this desperate cry went unheard. His eyes were staring into space, and he began his tale.

“The trade route had blown up, and all the barkeeps in town wept—not a drop of alcohol was coming in. A bar without booze is just an empty room. Customers might come, but when they learn there’s nothing to drink, things get ugly.”

Somehow, he was now holding a glass in his hand—whisky, on the rocks.

“Our salvation came at Lloyd’s hands. He found the road buried under fallen stones, and cleared the way all by himself. Moving boulders with his bare hands.”

“Har?!”

That was clearly ridiculous. But the boy himself?

“Oh, that’s hardly *legendary*,” Lloyd said, waving his hands. Totally clueless.

Classic Lloyd.

“And he doesn’t even know! That’s why everyone loves him. So says the president of the Azami Lloyd Lovers Club, Selen Hemein.”

When had she found time to create such a crazy club? But already other barflies were adding to the legends being regaled.

“Not long after, we had locusts thiiiiis big, and he was swatting them around like nothing!”

“Then at the military festival, Lloyd himself started flying. We all just went, ‘*Of course he can, why not.*’”

It was one feat after another. Using *Aero* to propel himself into the air and defeat that golem right in front of everyone had definitely sealed the deal.

Quite a few people had long since suspected that Lloyd might be extremely strong, but now they *knew*. He’d earned awe and respect from everyone.

But to sailors who’d been overseas since Abaddon was still in power, this was all real baffling.

The guild members decided to treat it like a joke.

“Yeah, spare me the tall tales. I wasn’t born yesterday! Yo, gimme the thing,” one of the sailors said.

He wagged his fingers, and another member passed him—

“Is that a *gun*?!”

“Yeah, a revolver. It holds six bullets.”

The firearm’s metallic shine unnerved the barkeep and barflies.

The Maritime Guild man put a single bullet in a random chamber, then spun the cylinder.

“You do this, and there’s no telling if a bullet will come out or not. You put yer hand on the table like so, and have the barrel pressed against the back of your hand. Then each person takes turns pulling the trigger. If you’re a legend, then you’re up for a test of nerves, right?”

“And shoot your hand?!”

Russian roulette—but using hands instead of heads. Lloyd gaped at him, and the man showed off his own hand.

“Don’t worry, if you’re lucky, you’ll still retain mobility. After a few months of hell. If you ain’t willing to take the risk, then go on home.”

The man’s palm showed the scar of a bullet hole. Since he’d had the barrel pressed right up against his skin, there was a nasty burn on the back of it, too.

“Well? You in?”

Lloyd hesitated for a moment, then agreed.

“You got nerves, at least.”

“I’m not big on pain, but...I’ve gotta show what I’m made of!”

Not backing down, Lloyd put his hand down on the table and glared at the man.

“Now it’s getting *interesting*!”

The man licked his lips and put his own palm down, unaware that using a line like that, in this situation, was likely jinxing him. This was the same guy who’d mentioned milk earlier, so he was certainly embodying the doomed thug cliché.

But nobody looking on knew such tropes, so they all just looked tense.

“Who’s going first? A snotnosed whelp like you won’t have the nerve!”

“...! I do! I’ll go first!”

Lloyd took the bait and the man grinned. The rest of his guildmates did, too. Clearly, there was some sort of trick to make the cylinder land with the bullet in the first chamber.

“Heh-heh-heh, well if all of them stories are true, one hand won’t hold you back. Don’t get scared now! Pull that trigger!”

“I’m not...that scared! I’m a soldier, too!”

Lloyd steeled his nerves, put the barrel to the back of his hand, and pulled the trigger.

And a gunshot echoed throughout the bar.

Then came the smell of gunpowder and a gasp from the crowd.

The guild men had known this would happen and started laughing.

“Bad luck, getting the bullet on the first shot! Better go show it to a doct—mm?”

But you know Lloyd. The guy who’d caught all the bullets coming out of a gatling gun.

“Hot!” he said, treating a bullet to the hand like picking up a pot from the stove without mitts. He put the back of his hand to his ear, cooling it down.

“Wh-what? Did I accidentally put in a blank?”

However, that was definitely a bullet lying crumpled at Lloyd’s feet. The whole table of men flinched.

“Ain’t no problem with the bullet...this is *real*.”

Lloyd’s response was rather different.

“All that build-up and it was a toy gun! You were just testing me, huh?”

This was not remotely true, and the guild member protested vehemently.

“How are you okay?!”

“I mean, it was hot? My heart skipped a beat!”

“There’s no way you’d get off that easy!”

But Lloyd was just happy to have cleared the challenge.

“So you’ll take me to Fumar now?”

Another burly man bellowed, “Of course not! You clearly cheated!”

“Huh? I did just what you asked! That’s not fair.”

Lloyd was pouting, but his opponent was dead certain there had to be a trick to it. It *was* hard to believe anyone could take a bullet uninjured.

Ignoring the fact that they had cheated themselves, he angrily put his elbow down on a barrel, and yelled, “Yer on!”, clearly challenging him to arm wrestling. “You can’t cheat at this!”

“Um, you want to arm wrestle?”

“Yep! Scared?”

“No, but...are you sure? There’s a ceiling here. And the floors are wood, so...”

Lloyd looked up and down, clearly concerned. His previous bout with Phyllo had given him some strange ideas about how destructive “city” arm wrestling was. Specifically, he believed it would defy gravity.

“Or wait, is this normal arm wrestling? Not the city kind?”

“What else?! There’s only one kind!”

Lloyd looked relieved.

“Good to know! Normal arm wrestling will only smash this barrel.”

“Uh...??”

Smiling broadly, Lloyd took the man’s hand.

His grin was downright unnerving, and the burly man’s bravado quickly faded.

“Smash...the barrel? You’re...really intense. Who are you?!”

With a confident grin, Lloyd said, “Phyllo and I regularly play normal arm wrestling, so I’ve gotten pretty good at it.”

Phyllo considered this hardcore training, not “play,” and it was fueled by a combination of her drive to surpass him *and* hold his hand. She was really taking advantage of him Lloyd had won every time—which is why he looked so sure of himself.

“I’ve been through a lot with the army. I’m not downplaying your guild experience, but I know I can win this.”

“First you can fly, then you cheat— All these lies are just attempts to unnerve us! You’re a con artist!”

He was basically just psyching himself up.

The barkeep stepped in to referee. “Ready...go!”

It was over instantly.

“Rah!”

“Okay!”

Pop.

That was definitely the distinct sound of a joint popping out, and everything from the elbow down turned the wrong way.

“Th-that’s not cheating! It hurts! Owwww!” the man howled.

“Oh, did I dislocate it?” Lloyd said. “That happens with Phyllo sometimes. Quit moving around! The best thing to do is—”

Lloyd quickly grabbed his arm and pulled it straight out, then back into place. All better. But the process hurts like hell.

“Aiiiiiiiiieeeee!”

This was the man’s first joint repair, and his scream was blood-curdling.

“Um, are you okay? Phyllo usually doesn’t bat an eye.”

She was a combat freak, and nearly as strong as Lloyd, so it wasn’t really a good point of reference.

The guild man recoiled backwards, tears in his eyes, as if he’d just been subject to a public execution. Then his place was taken by several more guild members.

“Th-this can’t be real! Flying?! Moving boulders with his bare hands?! It’s gotta be bullshit!”

At any minute, a full-scale brawl might break out, but Lloyd was all smiles.

“It’s all true!” he said. “I only just got the hang of flying the other day. See?”

Lloyd cloaked himself in *Aero*, and hovered a foot above the floor.

“”””” ”””””

The Maritimers were silenced at last. Even the bar regulars gaped. Everyone froze in place, their bangs waving in the winds. They’d all heard the stories, but seeing it with their own eyes made all the difference.

Lloyd looked quite proud of himself, like a kid proving to everyone he could ride a bike now.

That was the final nail in the coffin. The guild members finally gave in. “We’ll arrange a meeting with the captain!” they said, bowing low. Now they were the ones pleading with him.

“N-next week! We’ll have it set up by then, so please let us leave alive!”

“Next week? That’ll be fine,” Lloyd responded, beaming.

That smile looked like the devil’s grin, and these rough and tumble men left the bar quivering.

The guild members came tumbling back into the warehouse, bearing ominous news that a dangerous (from their perspective) man named Lloyd was demanding to see Fumar.

They’d all sobered up quick, and were white as sheets. Their cries of “Get the captain here, now!” soon attracted a crowd.

“What’s all this?” Fumar said, a glass of cheap moonshine on the rocks in one hand.

The guild members rushed toward him.

“Captain! Bad news! A real dangerous guy is after you!”

“Yeah?”

“Bullets bounce off him! He can fly! He dislocated my elbow like it was nothing! An’ he was smiling the whole time!”

The sailor who lost at arm wrestling must have felt like the devil’s own plaything.

“Your elbow looks fine,” Fumar growled, swigging his drink. “You’ve all lost your nerve and can’t think straight. Who we talking here?”

“He looks like a normal kid, but his strength is just insane! His smile is so sweet, but he acts like the devil incarnate! He said he was a soldier with the Azami army.”

“The army?! Ah, so Phase Two of this morning’s trouble. They’re coming at me from the fringes!”

He knocked back the last of his drink, sighing.

“If the front door approach don’t work, threaten my men, huh? What a pain.”

He considered this a minute, then began barking orders.

“All right, lubbers, change of plans! Get my ship loaded by morning, and we’re sailing out!”

“C-Captain, you won’t even meet him?!”

“Nope, I said my piece to the army already. Don’t got nothing more to say about the ball. I ain’t going, and no point talking about it anymore.”

“But if we break our word, there’s no telling what he’ll do to us...”

“Put a sock in it! You’ll all be on my ship. Ain’t nobody can follow us across the great blue yonder.”

With that, he started slapping butts, pushing the men who were traumatized by Lloyd toward the luggage.

“Can’t believe they all bought that crap about flying,” he muttered, grinding a chunk of ice between his teeth.

He glared at the Azami palace.

“What use will lies be, Luke? Men are all about *action!*”

Fumar headed to his cabin with a sad look in his eyes.

After inadvertently giving the Maritime Guild the fright of their lives, Lloyd went home. That very night...

Marie was doing circles around the table, clearly fretting about something.

Lloyd was wondering if he should ask what had happened when she made up her mind and swung around to face him. The lengthy delay between this abrupt shift and her actually speaking attested to the difficulty of the subject she was broaching.

“Um, Lloyd.”

“Y-yes? What?”

“This weekend, can we go on a d—shopping?”

“Sure thing.”

“And maybe a movie and dinner.”

“I do like movies! It’s been far too long.”

Ah, she was asking him on a date. That was a tall order. But what had brought that on? She was usually an unmitigated disaster.

Relieved by how easily he’d answered, she managed to keep that hidden, and was definitely pumping a fist in her mind.

Hell yeah! I did it! Not as a princess, but as Marie the Witch! Our first and last date!

If she was no longer going to see him in this guise, she would regret never having gone on a normal date. That was very understandable.

Lloyd didn’t seem to realize her true intentions, but inviting him at all was a tall enough order, so Marie went skipping back to her room.

On the day of the date, they were window shopping, headed toward the movie theater on the North Side.

The new theater was made of stone, and filled with tourists and families; it was the weekend, after all.

The familiar scents of popcorn—both buttery and caramel varieties—filled the air. It was officially called the Azami Kingdom National Cinema.

The kingdom of Rokujou was leading the charge on movie production, and this theater got all their newest hits. It had proven to be a major tourism draw, and Rokujou had popularized fresh juice mixes to enjoy with popcorn; the young and hip crowd were lining up with food in hand to experience the brand new innovative “talkie.”

“Wow, it’s been a while. And it’s my first time coming with you, Marie.”

“Oh, yeah? I remember now. You got to visit with the rest of the girls while I was busy helping kid grandma in some dusty old archive. Then she pushed me into the lake...”

Marie had gone from having a “fun day off” mood to “about to cry” in the space of two sentences. Lloyd did his best to console her.

“Um, but this is my first time seeing a talkie. I can’t believe they’ve got sound now!”

“True. But it doesn’t really seem all that impressive after seeing all the stealth footage of you that kid grandma has stored in her crystal...she really is ridiculous on several levels.”

Despite Lloyd’s efforts, memories of Alka were dragging her down again. Similar to how an employee at a terrible corporation can’t stop griping about their awful boss.

“So why a movie today? Did you want to see a talkie?”

“Y-you could say that.”

A simple question that made her blush and scratch her cheek. Very suspicious, but Lloyd was never one to pick up on these things.

Whew...Lloyd hasn’t figured it out. I’m nervous enough on my first-ever date!

She can say the word in her head, at least.

Yes, Marie was very nervous...and her sole anchor was the pile of women’s magazines she’d read. The kind of first date guides even teenagers would sneer at, yet she’d bought them without a trace of shame and read them cover to cover.

It’ll be fine! If I just do what they say, everything’ll work out!

Internally, she was confident. But all she had actually learned from them was that movies were a good choice. Which wasn’t wrong, but...you’d think there’d be more.

She’d swallowed that advice whole, and was committed to it as her one-and-only weapon of choice. Let’s just say she was the type who thought she’d already solved her problems after finishing a self-help book.

That a first date has to be at the movies was advice any search engine could give you, but little did she know this was secretly a *trap*.

Movies certainly provide you with some quiet alone time together, and a mutual topic of discussion for right after—both beneficial to a new couple.

But if you actually know each other pretty well, it could make everything way worse.

Imagine that your partner is laughing at the same scenes you are. Why, then you've got a shared experience! You both like the same things. You're even sitting side by side—the proximity alone will make you extremely nervous and take its mental toll. And if you were looking forward to this and didn't get much sleep—then the darkened theater leaves you fighting against the sandman. All of which could lead to a stifled dinner conversation—but Marie knew none of this.

Heh-heh-heh. My love bible, Azami☆Teen, says today will be perfect!

Selen was also a devotee to this particular ladies' magazine. That should tell you what it was like.

Marie was blissfully unaware that she was charging into an enemy formation armed not with a Cypress Stick but with a soft-baked pretzel. Perhaps she was better off remaining ignorant.

Seeing her smiling again, Lloyd asked about the movie itself.

"So, Marie, what are we seeing?"

"Er, um...I didn't check. Whatever the newest talkie is! It's bound to be good."

Not to put too fine a point on it, but few roads lead to ruin like going to see whatever's popular. There are exceptions, but the success rate is easily seventy percent disaster. You cannot skip planning the most important part! But she'd done just that, and...that was impressive, if you thought about it.

Lloyd checked the schedule for the latest talkie.

"Um, this one, right? It's called...Silent Rokujou?"

"Who might you be?! Identify yourself!"

"Ha-ha-ha! I am the blinding light! You know the name, now you know the man! Sardin Valyl-Tyrosine! World famous king of Rokujou!"

""Oh.""

Silent Rokujou was a talkie written, directed by, and starring...Sardin. Mena

and Phyllo's father, and the king of Rokujou.

The latest audio technology ensured his distinctively booming voice echoed through every inch of the theater, making the entire audience realize that "Silent" was deceptive marketing. Though arguably, he's exactly the type you would want selling this kind of technology.

The standout action scenes prominently featured his wife, Ubi Quinone, emphasizing their chemistry together more so than their royal power. The result was very much a B movie. The end credits included a blooper reel that mostly featured Ubi angrily telling her husband off, which went down much better than the actual film. The kind of B movie that tells you everything about the people who made it.

Most people would be satisfied with a film like that. After all, people were there to gawk in the glory of hearing voices in their movies, not for the content. An excitement found only at the dawn of any new technology. Its reputation would likely suffer in due time.

While the rest of the audience ate it up, Lloyd and Marie just looked exhausted. It was like watching a movie your friends made that's full of them flirting. Then when they saw *Gaffer: Allan* in the credits, Marie hissed, "What is he *doing*?"

So essentially, it wasn't the aspect of a B movie they objected to.

All the excitement of a "first date" was replaced with fatigue as they dragged themselves to the restaurant.

The toll had been too much, and they just flopped down in their chairs, half smiling at each other, neither saying a word. Food arrived, and they both mechanically worked through it.

Eventually the uncomfortable silence got to Lloyd, and he began trying to make small talk. Marie did her best to sound responsive, but this was definitely the portrait of a date gone wrong.

Argh, I blew it! Next time...next time...!

There wouldn't *be* a next time. Dates before you're even a couple spell doom if they go sideways, unless looks and income are exceptional.

In an attempt to restore her dignity—if she'd ever had any—she turned the subject toward the upcoming ball.

“So what’s going on with the princess? Any progress?”

“You could say so, yeah.”

Marie’s inability to get him to believe the truth was definitely eating at her, but she was doing her best to figure out his feelings regarding the prospect of dating the noble lady.

“The Princess of Azami never appears in public,” she said. “But you’re supposed to dance with her in front of all the guild leaders.”

Lloyd nodded, tense. “Yes, even I know what that means. No matter how we feel, everyone will assume we’re together. Any wrong move I make will be a blot on the royal family’s reputation.”

He clearly didn’t want that, and Marie didn’t blame him.

In fact, she felt guilty for laying this burden on him.

Here I was, getting all worked up about it. This is all my dad’s fault! Him and his meddling. I can only be eighty percent grateful for it now.

She was still largely inclined to support her father’s play here, though.

“Da— The king really treasures his daughter. He’s just not good at it.”

“You probably shouldn’t trash talk the king, Marie. Every father treasures their daughter.”

And every daughter trash talks their father.

“Fair,” Marie said, wincing. “But that’s not all that’s going on here.”

“It isn’t?”

“The king also lost his wife—the queen.”

“I knew that. I heard she passed shortly after giving birth to the princess.”

Marie knew better, and she shook her head.

“Just between us, she’s actually *missing*.”

“What? Was she kidnapped?”

“Clearly something happened to her, but nobody knows what. She left a note and hasn’t been heard from since.”

Marie took a sip of her drink, staring at her reflection in the glass.

“The king didn’t want his little girl to feel abandoned. Rather than say her mother was missing for unknown reasons, he chose to tell her the queen was dead. A real dumb move. Like she’d forget the warmth and love she’d received before the disappearance...or so I’ve heard.”

Realizing she’d spoken to much from the princess’s point of view, Marie hastily made it sound as if someone else had told her.

“Lloyd, you know Coba, right? The former soldier turned hotel owner?”

“Oh, yes. I’ve worked for him.”

“I only found this out recently, but pretending the queen was dead meant they couldn’t search for her officially. He left the army to do just that in private.”

“And he’s still looking?”

“Apparently. The king never gave up. I was told when he was freed from the demon lord’s control, the first thing he did was ask about his wife and daughter. After all that...”

“So his love for the queen is also a factor... That does explain why he dotes on his daughter this much.”

“He dreams about the three of them living together again. A real family man.”

Marie sighed, then gave Lloyd a look of pity.

“So, Lloyd, don’t be too mad at the king for trying every trick in the book.”

“I-I wasn’t...”

He wouldn’t dare. His fluster struck her as cute. She giggled.

Marie felt better to have gotten that off her chest. So much better she asked the thing she’d been aching to talk about.

“So, Lloyd...”

“Yes?”

“What would you do if I was the princess?”

“Ah-ha-ha, that joke never fails.”

He laughed so hard Marie wound up wearily groaning, “Yeah, it’s a joke all right...”

But after a couple of seconds, Lloyd actually gave it some thought.

“I wondered as much when I thought Riho was the princess,” he said. “But honestly, I don’t know. Finding out a friend of yours is actually the princess is a big deal, and learning they’re in love with you on top of that...?”

He’s never gonna pick up on these things, is he?

If one were to draw a love chart showing who was interested in who, Lloyd would be stabbed through with arrows from all directions, so Marie’s expression was verging on appalled.

After a moment’s thought, Lloyd said, “Still...”

“Still?”

“If you were the princess, I wouldn’t have been this worried.”

He shot her a smile.

Marie’s mind went blank. She completely froze.

“.....”

“Um, Marie?”

“.....”

“Er—M-Marie?”

Her mind slowly started working again, thinking over his words carefully, extracting meaning from them.

Wh-wh-whoa?! Wait?! Wait wait wait?!

Yeah, she isn’t getting anywhere. Those words stuck in her throat, similar to how cud remains being chewed by a cow. Perhaps she’s a bit *too* pleased.

If it had been her? He'd have been okay with it? To get married? Her thought pattern was becoming similar to Selen's, and her body started jerking like she was doing the robot.

"Marie? Are you okay?"

"I-I'm just dandy! Just got something stuck in my throat."

Not a common cause for dated dance moves, or even modern ones.

A server came by with a pot of coffee, and Lloyd flagged him down.

"E-excuse me!"

"More coffee? Be right with you."

Marie took the coffee from him as if she'd been waiting for just that.

"Yes, I'm perfectly all right, Lloyd. Let's have some coffee and calm down a little. Today was exhausting, so maybe a little extra sugar!"

She was trying to hide her fluster, but the phony monologue was so transparent she just looked desperate.



“Um, Marie.”

“Oh, this is good! So this is what real coffee tastes like!”

“That was the salt.”

“It certainly does have a salty...*bleghh! Cough cough cough!*”

Marie coughed so hard that coffee and snot went everywhere.

Her first-ever date was a traumatic experience. Back home, she dove straight into bed and sobbed into her pillow all night long.

His “date” with Marie had certainly had its share of mishaps, but Lloyd put that out of his mind, and headed back to the South Side wharf.

“Today’s the day! They said it was a very modern ship with both steam engine *and* magic stone power...”

The Maritime Guild members had given Lloyd a description of Fumar’s ship.

But he couldn’t seem to find it anywhere.

“Huh, that’s weird...”

He spotted a familiar fisherman and made inquiries.

“Um, hi! How’s it going?”

“Lloyd! It’s been far too long.”

He was greeted with a smile. Our boy had friends across the city.

“What’s up, Lloyd? I caught some good white fish if you want one.”

“Oh, thank you! But sorry, I’ve got my hands full right now. You see—”

He explained that he was seeking the Maritime Guild’s flagship.

“Oh, Captain Fumar’s vessel! Whatever for? That man’s got it in for the army.”

“I should have an appointment...”

“He’s almost never in Azami at all... Hold on a minute. Hey! Anyone seen Fumar’s ship? Lloyd’s looking for it.”

Before Lloyd knew it, every fisherman on the dock was bringing in reports. He

really was blessed.

Eventually, they confirmed that Fumar's ship had sailed out last week.

"What? It did?!"

"I'm guessing those men fed you a lie to give themselves time to make a getaway."

"Hmm, I sure didn't get that impression. They seemed pretty serious."

Yes, their abject terror had made it difficult to think anything they said was deceitful.

Lloyd began wondering if he'd misheard, but then decided to ask where Fumar had gone.

"Do you know which way he went?"

"Um, given the cargo, likely Rokujou. There's a couple of ports along the way...so he oughtta be sailing there."

"Oh, I see... Well, there's no school tomorrow, so I should make it," Lloyd muttered.

"It'll come back eventually," the fisherman said, and the others went back to their jobs.

"No time like the present. I'd better hurry!"

True to his word, Lloyd dashed back home, left a note for Marie that he'd be back in a few days, and then rushed to the old lighthouse.

This structure was no longer in use. It lay beyond the temporary dwellings set up for Jiou Empire refugees. While Alka had blown half of it away, it was still the tallest building facing the sea.

"Hmm, if that star's there...then this should be the right direction."

Lloyd wreathed himself in *Aero*, his ultimate move: Tempest Cloak. Kind of a goofy name, but one bestowed by his master, Satan. (Real name: Naruhito Seta.) "I used an explosion to get myself from Kunlun back to Azami, but this time I'm gonna make a long flight using my own power! I dunno if I can make it, but it's worth a shot!"

In broad daylight, a boy wreathed in wind flew out across the ocean. Someone saw it and yelled, “There’s a boy flying out to sea!” and everyone who knew him just went, “Yup, that’d be Lloyd.”

But one person wasn’t quite as good at taking things in stride—Marie.

“I’m back... Oh, no Lloyd? He said it was a half-day today...”

Marie had messed up plenty on their first date (that’s what she called it) and had picked up some dessert to try and get back in his good graces—the kind of tactic she *would* go for.

Part of her was already regretting that choice, but...then she saw the letter.

“A few days?! I’ve gotta cook for myself?!”

The blood visibly drained from her face. This was definitely an *I’m going home* letter.

“Is this my fault?! Is this because I got the sugar and salt mixed up?!”

Her eyes rolled back in her head. If she kept making faces like that, nobody would ever believe she was the princess.

Water as far as the eye could see. Way out in the ocean, a single ship puffing steam.

This was the Maritime Guild’s flagship, the *Rhazine*. Steam-and magic stone-powered, and crewed by former Azami royal guard Captain Fumar and his battle-scarred men.

If you had something to ship that absolutely *had* to reach its destination, you wanted Fumar and his *Rhazine*.

The man who’d sacrificed an elbow to Lloyd was on deck, brushing it down.

The morning sun rising over the horizon earned a baleful glare. Seen while doing back-breaking labor, even the most beautiful view would soon seem little more than the start of another bloody day.

As he scrubbed a few tenacious scraps of algae from the deck, the events of the week before swirled in his mind.

“Can’t believe we just left and broke our word to that terrifying kid. All he

wanted was to meet the captain...”

Instead, they’d fled to the seas near Rokujou. A wave of fear washed over him. This could well be the death of all of them.

“But if the captain says the word, it ain’t for the crew to argue. I’m just following orders!”

That was no real comfort, but, telling himself that he had done all he could, he focused back on the task at hand.

“We’re way out at sea. Nobody can locate one ship in these vast waters!”

He sure had a knack for jinxing himself. He turned it into an art form, really.

Most guild members were optimistically sure they’d be fine as long as they kept out of Azami.

Then—there was a noise behind him. Sounding as if something had fallen.

“What? Did a seagull ram the smokestack?”

He turned around to look and saw no bird.

Instead, he heard an all too familiar voice.

“Um, is this the right ship? I hope it is.”

A boy’s voice—but the most dangerous boy of all. A shiver ran down the crewman’s spine.

“No freaking way...”

Afraid of who he might see, he turned his gaze toward the smokestack, hefting the deck brush like a polearm.

“.....”

Nobody there.

“Scared the crap out of myself,” he chuckled, relieved. “Ha-ha-ha, I must not be sleeping.”

“Hmm, do I know anybody here?”

“——!!?!”

The sailor spun around, and again, there was no one there. He caught a momentary glimpse of a Lloyd-like figure but didn't want to admit it, so he assumed it was a delusion.

"I-I'm seeing things... The glare is straining my eyes! I'm going to an eye doctor as soon as we hit port."

"Oh, the arm wrestler!"

"Aiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeee!"

This time Lloyd was right there! The man couldn't lie to himself anymore! The threat was inches away and he froze.

How was he here? Sure, he could fly, but had he flown all the way here from Azami? That was a really long way! Lots of questions raced through his mind.

Lloyd came closer, smiling warmly.

"Hi, I've got an appointment. Remember me?"

That smile looked like the devil's grin. He didn't dare move a muscle.

"Or did I get the date wrong?"

Clearly, he knew full well he hadn't. The man was starting to quiver.

"Can I see Fumar now?"

There was clearly an implied "Or else" after that question. Goose bumps!

"Ah...aughhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

The hardened man of the sea buckled under fear and toppled over, foaming at the mouth.

"Huh? Gosh, he must have been tired. He did say something about having eyestrain."

Lloyd moved him into the shadows by the smokestack.

"But if he's here, this must be the right ship. I guess I'll just check anywhere Fumar is likely to be. I've got an appointment, so it'll work out!"

With that, Lloyd headed inside the ship.

Word that a deckhand had been found unconscious had just reached Fumar's

ears.

“He passed out *cleaning the deck*?”

Unknown monsters were a regular occurrence on the high seas, and aquatic monster research was part of the Maritime Guild’s purview. Yet this set of symptoms were new to him—and he had no way of knowing the guy had just been too scared of Lloyd to stay conscious.

Fumar looked the crew member over, frowning.

“Never heard of a treant out at sea. Uninjured, foaming... Did something scare the daylights out of him?”

“Sure you didn’t spot him slacking off, Captain?”

“Ha! I wouldn’t have left him unharmed. Spare me the daft jokes and haul him to the infirmary.”

They did, and Fumar watched him go, sighing.

“Too early for this. I haven’t even had breakfast yet...”

But he couldn’t stand idly by if unknown monsters were on the prowl. He headed back to his cabin to check the files and see if there was anything similar.

“Sea treants just sound like a joke. Maybe it’s some sorta squid? Or what, some stowaway’s going around attacking crew members?”

So close. A very cute boy, strange as it might seem.

Muttering to himself, Fumar reached for cabin door.

“Oh, excuse me!”

A charming voice, carefree and pleasant.

Like he was just asking directions.

But Fumar felt as if there was a wild animal behind him, ready to pounce. A rivulet of sweat poured down his brow.

How...?

He felt as if an assassin had him in his sights: One false step and the whole crew would go down with him.

Frozen to the spot, Fumar put two and two together. *This* was who had taken down the crew member on deck. He'd raised an uproar intentionally, creating an opening to get close, and sneak up behind him.

"Um, are you Fumar?"

Who is he? What does he want? Either way, he's got a lot of nerve pulling a stunt like this, knowing who I am!

Didn't matter if this boy was after his life or his cargo. Fumar reached for the blade in his pocket, ready to put his life on the line to save his crew. He spoke over his shoulder.

"What if I am?"

"Oh, good. I've been looking for you!"

"Yeah? Well, it's an honor to meet you."

"An honor? You flatter me."

He sounded genuinely embarrassed, and Fumar knew this guy was *good*.

Nothing rattles him. Fifty-plus years I've been in this game. For this to happen on my own ship...

The boy behind him was clearly an experienced killer. Fumar tightened his grip on his blade—and he swung around, thrusting his dagger.

But the boy didn't even dodge. Lloyd just let it hit him.

He now had a knife in his guts—but this was *Lloyd*.

"Oh?"

"Huh?"

Fumar gaped down at his hand. The knife had *bent*. Squiggled.

Lloyd, meanwhile, was just puzzled as to why there was a knife involved at all. Then he remembered it was morning.

"Oh, sorry, were you about to make breakfast? If you were busy peeling an apple...but you've gone and bent it! Let me fix that for you."

Lloyd took the dagger from Fumar, and gave the blade a quick tug,

straightening it out.

Disarmed in the blink of an eye, Fumar was highly perturbed.

“H-how...?”

Upon closer observation, this kid was just a boy.

Fumar shook that off, searching for his next move.

“C-Captain!”

“What’s wrong, Captain?”

Other guild members came rushing in. The narrow hall filling up with burly sailors.

They saw Lloyd with Fumar’s knife in hand—which sure seemed as if *Lloyd* was the one attacking.

“Y-you’re...

“Oh, the men from the bar!”

The dagger still in his hand, Lloyd smiled pleasantly. The crowd shivered in fear.

“I-If you do that here...you won’t leave alive!”



Before the crew could make a move, Fumar roared, “Belay that!”

The sailors froze, eyes on their captain, wondering why.

“Not one of you stands a chance against him.”

Fumar wiped the sweat from his jaw.

“What is you want, boy? State your business.”

“Oh, thank you!”

But this joy, this pleasant smile, looked downright diabolical.

“In return, I ask that you spare their lives.”

“Um, sure? I’m lost, but no problem.”

“Okay. Let’s talk in my room. I ain’t going nowhere.”

On guard, Fumar opened the cabin door and stepped in.

Lloyd followed after him.

It was larger than the other cabins, but between the nautical charts and the stacks of books, it felt rather cramped. The place wasn’t really meant for meetings, but was more of a study with a few bottles on the desk.

Fumar waved him to a plain wooden chair, and without a single greeting, dived straight into negotiations.

“State your business.”

Lloyd politely introduced himself. “Oh, my name is Lloyd Belladonna.”

Fumar’s frown deepened. This was the politest assassin he’d ever met.

“Well, you know your manners. I’m Fumar Ketoshifen, captain of the Maritime Guild.”

“Oh, I’m a student at the Azami Military Academy.”

“A student?! You’re a *cadet*?!”

“I am. I’m often told I don’t look it.”

“I entirely agree.”

Lloyd was thinking he was *too puny-looking to be a soldier*, but Fumar meant *clearly a professional killer*.

Damn you, Luke! Training this kid to bump off your foes... What's up with the army's curriculum? Does he want me at this ball that badly?!

This confusion was not helping things, but Lloyd bowed politely and got to the point.

"Um...do you mind if I explain why I'm here?"

"Yeah, my men told me the stories about you. I didn't think they were all true."

Lloyd was unsure what stories these might be, so he simply moved on.

"I'm actually here to ask a favor of you."

"If you're army, then the ball—"

"I'm actually trying to find the princess. Do you know where she is?"

".....Huh? The princess?"

Fumar's voice went up an octave. The question came out of nowhere and his brain couldn't register it.

"This ain't about the ball?"

"The ball? No, I'm not in charge of invites. Someone more important is delivering that."

His head finally wrapped around the idea that this was about something else—but that meant an assassin was looking for the princess. Terrifying. He chose his words carefully.

"Why do you assume I'd know?"

"Huh? Aren't you good friends with the king? I figured you'd know these things."

".....That was a long time ago. Before he betrayed me."

Lloyd caught a glimpse of something on his face that reminded him of his own experience.

“Did he really?”

“What?”

“Or did he do what he thought best, and fail to explain himself properly? That can happen, even with friends.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t always apply.”

“I have a big brother figure I trusted completely. But he started doing really bad stuff, thinking it would help me out. His methods were wrong—but deep down, he was still thinking of me, so I can’t hold it against him. I know it’s not my place to say, but maybe what you perceive as a betrayal was done for you—or for someone else important to him.”

“That was for the sake of the princess!”

Merthophan had told him as much earlier. Fumar swore under his breath.

“.....It’s been over a decade. If I got it wrong...well, it takes a lot of guts to admit a thing like that, kid. Old men’s hard heads don’t straighten out as easy as that knife there.”

This reminded Lloyd he was still holding the captain’s dagger, so he returned it.

That and the kindness behind his words was finally making Fumar wonder if Lloyd might *not* be here to kill him.

“I guess that makes sense. Who sends an assassin over an invitation to a ball? He’s just one of those ‘doesn’t know his own strength’ types.”

“Oh? Who are we talking about?”

“Never mind. Sorry, but I got no clue where the princess is. She’s never once been in my care.”

“Y-you don’t? Then I’m back to square one. Argh.”

“So why you looking for her? I heard she’s been found and is safe and sound somewhere. They called off the reward and everything.”

If Lloyd wasn’t here about the ball, Fumar was starting to wonder about his motivations.

“Uh, you see...”

Lloyd decided it was safe to confide in him the truth, and did so.

“Ah-ha. You heard about my history with Luke and thought I might know. And you asked my men to introduce us, and simply accepted the fight they proposed.”

“I dunno if that was a fight. More just...testing my nerves.”

“You sound like you believe that! Blimey, cadets these days.”

Fumar’s knees were still rattling in the face of Lloyd’s limitless power, but it was also becoming clear the boy’s soul was as pure as they came, so his brain was left reeling in the void between.

“Don’t think I can help, but still...I don’t get it.”

“Get what?”

Fumar pointed right at him.

“Why you gotta turn down the princess’s affections. Does your heart belong to another?”

“N-no.”

“Then it makes no sense. And coming all the way out here before the ball— You can’t just handle things the day of?”

“I thought it would be proper to meet and clear things up in advance. I didn’t want to upset the plans at the last minute. I’m just a cadet. If I turn her down on the big day, it might leave her reeling.”

“But what if she’s a real cutie? Luke may be dopey-looking, but I guarantee her mom had the good genes. And the personality to boot.”

He had the lime juice out and was pouring Lloyd a glass. He was in full life coach mode. That had helped Lloyd admit the truth.

“I’m just a hick from the boonies. I’m no match for a princess.”

“So what?” Fumar growled, glaring at him. Lloyd flinched, and the captain’s gaze softened. “Sorry, I said the same thing in the past and let the love of my life slip away. ’Course, in my case, the dame’s feelings went the other way.”

“You mean...?”

Fumar took a sip of lime juice and scrunched up his face.

“My love was as tart as this juice. But one man was royalty, and the other was a soldier. I figured the best thing I could do was step aside for her own good. These days, I wish I’d at least told her how I felt. Luke ain’t even looking for her.”

“Oh, that’s not true,” Lloyd said. “He’s still got people looking for the queen.”

Fumar thought Lloyd was just lying to protect the king.

“Ha! You’d say anything to cover your boss’s screw-ups.”

“No, I mean it. He’s still got men out there searching. I have the word of a trusted source on that.”

Lloyd was confident Marie’s intel was accurate, and held Fumar’s gaze.

“Trust, huh?”

“For all your griping, you trust the king, too.”

“How so?”

“I can hear it in your voice. You’ve got a kind heart underneath. Reminds me a lot of one of my friends.”

This was Riho. The glow of kindness in Lloyd’s look left Fumar shifting uncomfortably.

“I dunno...I guess part of me still wants to.”

“I know a lot of people I trust—not just the two I’ve mentioned. Sometimes they don’t act the way I think they should, but I know we’ll be on the same page in time. I think we always will. I bet you and the king are like that, too.”

“Are you giving me advice, now?”

“Oh, no! I didn’t mean— Sorry, I shouldn’t have.”

Lloyd was all too ready to apologize, which made Fumar crack up.

“Bwahaha! Nobody’s dared to tell me off since Luke and Rien. Only they never felt bad about it. Rien used to heal my wounds while giving an endless earful

about the value of my own life— Those were the days!”

His voice boomed, and the door burst open. His men had been listening closely, trembling, and assumed the worst.

“C-Captain! Everything is okay? I’d give my life if—”

“Belay that!” Fumar roared. Then he rubbed his temples; he was surrounded by lovable idiots. “I’m busy traveling down memory lane! Don’t bring me crashing back to earth with your ugly mugs.”

Then he turned back to Lloyd.

“Status and age ain’t no obstacle where love exists. If you tell her how you really feel, it’ll get through. Ain’t no need to make a fuss about turning her down in advance.”

“Y-you think so?”

Fumar gave his best kindly grandpa grin.

“You’re considering her feelings even though you’ll be turning her down, right? She’ll be sad, sure. But the candor will help. Getting spurned never took anyone out for good. Especially since this princess is the daughter of the woman I loved, and my best friend.”

Lloyd was grinning now— Wait, that was more of a smirk.

“Heh-heh, now you’re being honest! Best friend, huh?”

Realizing what he’d let slip, Fumar tried to cover it up.

“Don’t rub it in! Remember who you’re talking to. I’m Captain Fumar, the man who keeps Azami running.”

“Oh...r-right.”

Fumar’s shoulders rocked with laughter, and he thumped Lloyd’s chest.

“I’ll tell you what, call off this princess search, and tell her how you feel at the ball. Then we’ll be even. Steel your nerves and listen to her side of the story, too.”

These words of encouragement left Lloyd with a rush of emotion.

“Y-yes, sir!” he said.

“Good answer. Now you get on home. My men are too spooked to get their work done with you around. How did you get on board anyway? A dinghy? You didn’t swim here, did you?”

“No, I flew. I only just figured out how fly! Eh-heh-heh.”

Lloyd smiled bashfully, and Fumar’s grin froze in place.

“W-well, if you flew here...you can fly... Okay. Well, if you do that, my men will pass out, so what say I drop you at the nearest harbor first?”

“Oh, okay.”

They dropped Lloyd off, and Fumar gave their encounter some thought.

“Here I am, telling that kid to lay his feelings out there...and I haven’t done the same.”

His own advice coming back to haunt him. Fumar let out a long sigh, then called his for his crew.

“Once we unload this cargo in Rokujou, let’s make a beeline back to Azami.”

“Y-yes, captain. Why Azami?”

“Got some business there.”

A few days later, word arrived that Fumar *would* attend the ball.

The Maritime Guild’s sudden about-face caught Choline by surprise.

“What happened there? They brushed you off like nothing, Merthophan.”

The two of them were in a room in the Azami palace.

Neither of them knew that Lloyd had gotten himself involved, so they were clueless—but eventually a thought came to mind.

“Oh, it must have been the lime juice! He liked it so much it changed his mind! Farmwork brings us all together.”

“I-it does?”

Chrome shook his head, pretty sure that wasn’t it.

But Merthophan was on his feet, flushed with enthusiasm. “Agriculture can solve any problem! What could be better news?!”

“There he goes, getting all giddy... Well, he ain’t the only one.”

Choline glanced across the room.

“A ball... Dancing! With Lloyd...at a ball!”

Marie the Witch, the world’s least-likely princess.

In return for resuming palace duties, she (might) get to date Lloyd. That bait had hooked her good. She felt slightly guilty about using her dad’s authority to force the issue, but Lloyd had said he wouldn’t have been so worried if she was the princess, and that was all the excuse she needed.

“I’ll miss my lazy life with Lloyd...and all the neighbors, but...I’ve got lots of competition lately, and I’m playing a losing game. Gotta go for it!”

The first thing she’d said was likely the only true part, but let’s just pretend we didn’t notice.

But the king was looking very earnest.

“Fumar...”

He looked quite nervous about meeting his estranged friend again. The good times tend to get overshadowed by the bad.

If Fumar acted as if he was a stranger, would he be able to stand his ground? Or would he turn and flee the room? He couldn’t let himself do that! And that left him going in circles.

“All I can do now...is show him how our daughter’s grown.”

“Ugh, the waist is too tight! Have I been drinking too much? No, good times always make you put on a few pounds— It’s allowable.”

These pounds had arrived before the good times, though...

“Hmm... Well, maybe if she’s just herself, that’ll remind him of Rien, and he’ll get some good laughs.”

The king smiled dotingly.

Chapter 3

Pretty Paternal: Instinctive Love, Like All Fathers Have

At last, the day of the ball arrived.

Soldiers and cadets alike had done everything in their power to get the venue ready. The dance hall looked as if it could be a part of the finest hotel in the land, with every aspect polished to luxurious perfection.

The chandeliers above were especially spectacular, their glitter awe-inspiring. The chief lighting technician—Allan—had adjusted every angle and placement for maximum impact, truly a master of his art. The visiting dignitaries were enraptured by the splendor. Just don't go forgetting your day job, Allan.

"Fixture twelve, not enough mana. Move to resupply or swap out the stone."

Even now, he was running his crew through their paces—he'd definitely forgotten what he really did.

But this was inexplicably bolstering his reputation. Half the dignitaries took one look and thought, "The Dragon Slayer goes all out even behind the scenes!"

His efforts had also helped ease tensions. The dignities were soon chatting away, talking business, setting up deals. The prospect of war was certainly still in people's minds, but the atmosphere was more of a friendly gathering.

Riho and Mena were standing together, eyes scanning the crowd. But they were not really alert or watchful. Their eyes were...dead.

"Lloyd's not here."

"Nope." Riho sighed.

What's this? Well, we'd better turn back the clock to just before the venue doors opened.

"The day of the ball has arrived! Oh, if only we weren't working, I could be dancing with Lloyd myself!"

“Yeah, yeah, quit drooling and start working.”

Selen and Riho were doing their usual routine, but Phyllo wasn't chiming in. She seemed to be lost in thought.

“What's up, Phyllo?” Riho asked.

Phyllo's next words were *ominous*.

“.....So.....I saw Master, earlier. And he seemed...off.”

“Indeed, he did! He's been acting odd for days!”

“Wonder if this has anything to do with his search for the princess.”

As they discussed the matter, Allan came by with some light fixtures.

“What's wrong, ladies? Shouldn't you be at your posts?”

“Well, the lighting idiot sure is carefree. We're talking about Lloyd and the princess.”

Allan knew enough to get where they were coming from, and gave them a look of pity.

“You've finally heard the news? It must have hit you hard.”

“Wait, Allan! Since when are you allowed to pity *us*?”

“.....That look..... He *knows* something.”

Figuring it was the day of the ball, it was no use continuing to hiding things, so he filled them in.

The color drained from all three of their faces. The king's scheme might well leave Lloyd with no other option *but* to date the princess.

When Allan finished, there was a grim silence.

He hadn't expected it to hit them *this* hard. Feeling like he'd messed up somehow, he tried to cover it up.

“Look, they're just dancing. That doesn't mean they're getting married. No need to look so glum.”

“.....You are so dumb,” Phyllo growled.

“Wh-what? Isn’t that a bit too harsh.”

“Allan...the missing princess is making her first public appearance. And her dance partner was personally picked by His Majesty.”

“Even if no one says something, everyone will assume they’re together.”

“.....If he’s this dumb.....Renge must be at her wit’s end.”

“L-leave her out of this! I’ve got work to do! Wrap up that pity party fast!”

Still not quite getting it, Allan beat a teary retreat, his dignity in tatters.

The girls all looked...disgruntled.

“It’s basically a public proposal. He can’t just dance and then skedaddle. That would be rubbing the royals’ faces in the dirt. Even Lloyd’s probably figured that much out.”

“.....But he might not be in a position to refuse. I hope so, anyway...”

Only Selen was maintaining hope.

“I have faith in Sir Lloyd. And whatever happens...I’ll simply *intervene*.”

“Uh, Selen, a rampage in front of all the guild top brass... Pick your moment.”

“.....Sometimes violence *is* the answer.”

So that was why Riho was so glum. Mena had heard the news from Choline... and sympathized.

Her infamously narrow eyes were open slightly wider than usual, and she shifted uncomfortably.

“Since he’s gotta dance with the princess, he’s probably in the dressing room,” Riho groaned. “Maybe they’re already snuggling up.”

“Look, dancing doesn’t lead to romance or marriage right away.” Mena sighed. “It’s not something to get depressed about.”

This sounded as if she was trying to convince herself.

“In front of all these people? All of these important people?” Riho asked, hopelessly. “Princess Maria *finally* shows herself, and picks *him* to dance with. Anyone would know what that meant. Even Lloyd!”

“So why not?” Mena said, leaning in. “Bust down the dressing room doors and go wild.”

“I am technically on duty.”

“Then do the ‘Objection!’ thing! Get him to let you down gently!”

“I make a scene, yet still get rejected?” Riho yelled.

Mena grinned. “Feeling better?”

Riho finally realized Mena was just worried, and sheepishly scratched her head.

“Uh...I can at least act like I am. But that’s not the point!”

At that moment, Selen and Phyllo came over. Both were dressed as servers.

“Plotting to snatch Sir Lloyd away, are we?”

“.....The times, they’re calling for bloodshed.”

“You girls are *too* gung ho.”

Riho expected Selen to be at least a bit off-stride.

“Seems like Selen’s eyes still have that gleam in them. I figured you’d lose all sparkles and immediately go snatch Lloyd’s personage.”

Selen chuckled.

“Marie dancing with him does *not* mean his heart belongs to her. I suspect this issue will cause so much tension between the two that the recoil will send him into my arms! Do not underestimate the power that the laws of physics have over love.”

This naturally assumed that no friction could ever arise with *her*, which seemed unlikely.

“Ah-ha-ha, Selen! You’re usually the first to assume the slightest thing means marriage!”

“.....Double standards.”

Selen cheerily ignored this, expanding upon her “logic.”

“No matter what befalls him, Sir Lloyd will always return to me. Any lapse of

faith in that principle and I will no longer be Selen Hemein.”

“I sure envy your brain sometimes...mm?”

There was a commotion on the other side of the quiet ballroom.

“Captain Fumar...!”

“I thought he loathed the army?”

“He’s so intense!”

Fumar strolled through the doors alone. He was ignoring the dress code entirely, acting as if his usual garb *was* his formal attire. Like any good pirate or mob boss.

His evident ferocity sent a ripple of anxiety across the room.

“Yo,” he said, finding Merthophan.

“Captain Fumar... A pleasure to see you here.”

“Spare me the formalities. That lime juice was a bit tart, but that’s just about right for a long sea voyage. Thanks for it.”

Merthophan’s face lit up. “Thank you, sir. If I may ask...”

“Mm? What?”

“What changed your mind? Did the lime juice make you reevaluate your opinion of the army?”

“That’s a good one! Didn’t take you for a man prone to witticisms.”

Merthophan had been serious, so this deflated him a bit.

“O-oh, right. But...what did change your mind? If it’s not too much to ask?”

“Curious?”

“Almost as much as I am of your opinion of the juice.”

This was also not a joke. His mind was always on the farm.

“It ain’t too much to ask, but I can’t be bothered explaining. Long story short...”

Fumar’s eyes scanned the crowd.

“Is Lloyd around?” he asked.

“Y-yes. Likely in the fitting room.”

“Ah. He steeled himself, then.”

Fumar grinned, and Merthophan connected the dots. Once again, Lloyd had saved the day without even realizing it.

There was another stir...and the king approached.

“Fumar...”

“Sup, Luke.”

A reunion between two former friends. Their history hung over them, their eyes alone speaking volumes. The crowd gulped, unsure if they were about to hug or throw down.

The first to break the silence was Chrome, on guard at the king’s side. He steeled his nerves and spoke.

“We have seats prepared on the balcony. You must have a lot to catch up on.”

“Yeah, we do.”

Would that be considered an accusation or conversation? Fumar’s loaded grin left Chrome in a cold sweat.

“This ain’t good.” Sensing the crackling tension, Choline decided she’d better fix things, and sent the orchestra an order. “Play something sophisticated, stat!”

The conductor nodded, and started up a lively dance number. A number of people dressed in dancewear hit the ballroom floor, trying to change the mood.

“Oh, how elegant! Allan, we must dance.”

No one loved elegance more than Renge, a lady from the Ascorbic Domain who doted on Allan. (He was somewhat scared of her.) “Er, uh...I wanna tweak the lights to match this number...”

Work was no great excuse to turn down a dance, and Renge was soon fuming.

“Yer wife or yer light fixtures! Pick one!”

When she got mad she slipped into her native dialect. Allan was soon dragged

out onto the floor.

“That’s the Dragon Slayer!”

“And he’s with the ax master!”

“Such a lovely couple!”

Allan was a local hero, and Renge was the chief of the domain’s ax clan. The sight of them dancing together brought smiles all around. Just not on Allan’s face.

“.....If Master gets the same reaction...ugh.”

“We’ll just start screaming, ‘Fake news.’ With righteous fury.”

Selen’s confidence was largely baseless, but her snort made it clear she had utter faith in Lloyd.

Meanwhile, Lloyd’s would-be dance partner—Marie—was in a waiting room getting a full makeover.

“How does the waistline feel now?”

“Thanks, that’s a much better fit. You really saved me there.”

“All of us women share the same concerns. I’m Pamela, daughter of the Siegquelle tailors—if I can’t fix this on the fly, I’d hardly be worthy of the name.” She pushed up her glasses.

A confident gesture that Marie found weirdly intimidating.

“R-right...you’re a tailor’s daughter. So why the army?”

“I’m so glad you asked! My goal is to spread the word about the quality of our garments throughout the Azami military industrial complex. Alongside tending to my duties as a soldier, naturally.” Again, she pushed up her frames.

She was a member of the PR division—and had been directly responsible for having forced Lloyd to wear the nurse outfit for the campaign.

“Gosh. Well, you certainly know what you’re doing.”

“So I want to demonstrate that we can accommodate any request. Any style changes you think of, say the word. The waltz? An intense tango? A domain folk

dance? We've got 'em all!" Again, she did the same gesture with her glasses.

The folk dance outfit consisted of a headband made from two twisted cords, and a happi festival coat. You could hear the shamisen already. Hearing the traditional song "Soran Bushi" echo across a ballroom floor would certainly be unprecedented.

Marie gently rejected them all, and Pamela left the room.

The princess looked briefly tired, then...

"Me and Lloyd... Eh-heh-heh..."

Her eyes were totally bleary. If this was the first thing she thought of when left alone, she was *really* looking forward to this.

It was a bit forced, but...if they could be more than princess and soldier, shopkeeper and tenant—well, that just left her dreaming of happiness to come.

"If that's on the table...coming back to the castle is no big deal. And really, all the hard work I put in was always *supposed* to bring me back."

With her dad possessed, she'd fled, met Alka, and disguised herself, living in the slums on the East Side—yet now that part of her life was coming to a close, and she knew part of her would miss it.

"What will Lloyd do when he learns we won't be living together anymore?"

She was starting to regret considering only how she would benefit from the dance. But she quickly shook off those fears.

"It'll be okay! Lloyd will accept the truth! Owww..."

She'd shaken her head so hard she'd hurt her neck, and was left rubbing the back of it, chagrined.

"Master would call me all sorts of names if she saw me like this."

The thought of Alka took Marie down memory lane once more.

"What did she say to me? 'You look like—argh, sorry, my mistake.' Did I remind her of someone? Strange reason to take an apprentice, really."

They'd traveled the world, where Marie had honed her magic skills, forcing herself to master rune technology to save her father from the demon

possessing him—and that had involved a harrowing trip to Kunlun. Memories of her own past hardships left Marie shivering.

“That village is too much! And it left me with a complex about my chest. ‘You brazen boob monster!’ or ‘You just gotta hog all the eyes in the room!’ I got sick of fighting about it and stormed off... Really takes me back.”

Yet Alka had worried about her, and had kept an eye on her via crystal ball. That was clear now—and Marie recalled how they’d been reunited.

“Lloyd arrived, and she followed...and everything turned out all right. But I was so happy living in that little shop, I just never left.”

Being with Lloyd was certainly the biggest factor, but the neighbors were friendly—she knew how well she’d enjoyed being not the princess, but Marie the Witch.

“When I messed up cooking my rice and someone gave me more—I never even paid them back! When I get back to the palace, are they gonna ask me to make room in the budget for proper paving stones?”

But as she muttered to herself, she heard voices outside the door.

“It looks perfect, Lloyd. You’re ready for high society!” Pamela pushed up her glasses.

“Th-thank you. Um, is the princess here?”

“Yes, right in there. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have more to do!”

Pamela ran off, and Marie got to her feet.

H-he’s here! Lloyd! It’s time he finally learns the full, unvarnished truth!

What was included in that was a mystery, but Marie was all fired up, and her heart was racing.

“Um, Your Highness?” Lloyd’s voice coming through the door.

“.....C-come in!” Marie barely managed a squeak.

A long moment passed, but Lloyd didn’t enter. Marie was just about to speak again, when she heard his muffled voice once more.

“It’s Lloyd Belladonna. Sorry to do this through the door, but I just...can’t do

this face-to-face.”

He can't? Did he figure out I'm the princess and get all embarrassed? That's ridiculous.

“Um, I heard from the king...that you had feelings for me. And that's why you wanted to dance together, but...”

She heard his heels click together. She could picture him bowing.

“I'm sorry. I can't reciprocate those feelings!”

Whaaat? After all this?

Marie was screaming on the inside, and lurched sideways hard enough that she made a loud noise.

Lloyd must have assumed she was angry because he started apologizing again.

“I really am sorry. I'm just a lowly soldier—I'm no match for you! And that's just part of it. There's more...”

There is?!

Marie was starting to worry he had someone else, and her pulse quickened.

Lloyd plucked up his courage, and took a deep breath—saying the *last* name she least expected. Really, nobody could have predicted it.

“I know this girl named Marie.”

A shocking twist out of nowhere! Whaaaaaat?!

Marie was straight up dancing. Her clothes audibly swishing, every muscle moving, hitting peak heart rate.

She never thought she would hear this from Lloyd! She was totally on board with this turnabout, fully committed.

——But the next thing Lloyd said suggested she'd gotten ahead of herself.

“Maybe you've heard of her, Your Highness? I live on the East Side, in a shop run by a witch named Marie. She's the one...”

The one what? The one for you? The one you love the most?

“The one I can’t stop worrying about. She just has no life skills!”

.....*Hngg?*

This seemed to be drifting away from what she wanted to hear.

As Marie’s frown deepened, Lloyd began listing reasons for his concern.

“I am genuinely unsure how she managed to survive before I arrived. She’s a total disaster! If I don’t watch her like a hawk, she’ll live on booze alone, and get so drunk she’ll pass out on the floor naked or start washing herself in the kitchen sink. Or picking discarded clothes off the floor, sniffing them, and going, ‘Still good!’”

.....*He saw that?!*

Feeling as if she was on the receiving end of a scolding, the list of faults was really getting Marie down.

“I’m completely certain if I leave her alone, Marie won’t survive long. But if I end up in...any sort of relationship with you, I doubt I could keep living with her. It might lead to ugly rumors that could harm your reputation.”

Technically, sure, if you were engaged to one girl and living with another, the gossip magazines might run wild with it.

Marie was feeling rather faint, but Lloyd just kept hitting her where it hurt.

“So I *am* sorry, but until she’s able to fend for herself, I can’t leave her be. She’s gotta at least manage to clean and do laundry once a week...and learn to pick her own veggies daily...”

“.....”

“Once Marie’s gained some autonomy, I promise I’ll consider your feelings again. I realize this is all very selfish on my part, but...I’ve gotta go.”

Without ever opening the door, Lloyd turned to go.

The sound of his retreating footsteps echoed in Marie’s ears.

“.....”

Her heart had stopped completely. The letdown from “Maybe he loves me too!” to “He doesn’t even see my *potential*” was too much to bear. She’d just

found out the boy she loved had always pitied her.

“So *that’s* why he wouldn’t have worried if I was the princess. Because he felt too sorry for me to leave...”

Lloyd raised her hopes up, only to shoot her down—all without ever realizing it. Truly a force to be reckoned with.

Mind blank, eyes dimmed, a tear ran down her cheek.

“I guess...he doesn’t *totally* hate me...?”

That was the closest to a bright side she could find.

Meanwhile, the king and Fumar were sitting on a second-story balcony, with music and merriment from the ball floating to them on the breeze.

Royalty and a guild leader, sitting in VIP seats, sipping drinks—which one might assume consisted of the finest liquor, but the bottle on the table was cheap wine you could find at any local market.

They poured for each other, clinked glasses, and took a sip.

“You sure kings are allowed to drink this swill?”

“I’ve got the tongue of a pauper. Always did like this better. As did you.”

“True. Out at sea, any old thing’ll get you drunk fast, might as well get something that doesn’t bust the wallet.”

After a few moments of small talk, Fumar made the first move.

“I’ve heard you’re still searching for her. That’s why Coba quit?”

“Who told you that?”

“The wind. Came aboard my ship like a storm.”

He was referring to Lloyd, but worded so cryptically that the king didn’t get it. Fumar didn’t mind.

“I’d just assumed you’d long since given up. You were so quick to put out word Rien had died, I thought she’d fallen out of love with you and run off, and you were trying to cover up how you’d failed her.”

“It was nothing like that,” the king said. “I just couldn’t tell Maria her mother

left without a reason. I knew she'd feel abandoned. It pained me to do it, but I couldn't think of anything else. Perhaps I should have told *you* the truth."

"But before you could, Abaddon got you?"

"A merchant brought word that they'd seen someone who looked like the queen. Naturally, I invited them into the castle...and have no memories of the years that followed."

There was a grim silence. They sipped their drinks without exchanging a word.



“You slipping? How pathetic. You’d never have made that blunder back in the day.”

“I know!” the king groaned. “I’m still kicking myself.”

“I’m no better,” Fumar said, his voice filled with remorse. “I think I was just scared to learn the truth. Part of me hoped if it was your fault Rien left, and if I tracked her down, then maybe she’d finally be mine—but that was nothing but a tantalizing fantasy.”

“Sorry. My heart still belongs to her.”

“Of course it does, nincompoop.”

Fumar chugged the rest of his glass, and sloshed in some more.

“Argh, the older you get, the harder it is to admit when you’re wrong, or drink the pain away. Once all it took was a single round, and it would all be water under the bridge.”

“We should drink and be merry! It’s my daughter’s big day.”

“Her big day? So I heard—directly from the wind himself.”

“She’s safe, and back in the castle. And we’re showing off her future groom! What day could be better than that?”

“Using young Lloyd as bait to get her back home ain’t nothing but an abuse of power. You’re a bad dad.”

“You know that much, you oughtta sympathize!”

“How would I? I’m a bachelor.”

“Wait, you know Lloyd?”

“Took you long enough. He’s a good boy. Dumb, but forthright. Can see why you’d want your daughter hitched to him.”

Fumar was not prone to praise, and the king was very pleased.

“True, true. And tonight, that boy’ll be engaged to Maria.”

“They’re just gonna dance.”

“But dancing in front of all these important people! You know what

everyone'll think."

"You've gotten good at these games. But I dunno if it'll work out."

"Mm? Why not?"

Just as the king frowned, Chrome came rushing in, out of breath.

"Y-Your Majesty!"

"What is it, Chrome? Is Maria about to reach the ballroom? I must be there to show her off!"

"A-about that...Maria says she wants to cancel her appearance."

"What?!" The king's eyes nearly popped out of his head. "What happened?! It's her chance to be with Lloyd!"

"Apparently Lloyd went and turned Maria down. Talked to her through the door and said he couldn't reciprocate her feelings...because of this girl named Marie who he can't leave alone."

"Er, what? Then he still has no idea Marie the Witch is Princess Maria? Did she not tell him? They've been living there together for ages!"

This shocking fact left him reeling.

"Bwa-ha-ha! The boy up and did it!"

Fumar was doubled over, and the king let go of Chrome and wheeled toward him.

Chrome took this moment to beat a hasty retreat, claiming he had work to do.

"Fumar! What did you do?"

"Not much. I just gave the boy a push, and told him to do what he felt right."

"And ruined everything! I thought I could live with my girl again! Everything has gone down the drain!"

"You want to go at it, old-timer?"

"You're just as old!"

They were grabbing each other's shirt by the collar, looking ready to rumble.

“Oh? I heard you were feuding, but this looks pretty friendly.”

““——!!!””

They'd know that voice anywhere, and turned toward her, shirts still mutually clenched.

“Lou, Fu, it's been a while.”

The Adventurer Guild Master—Marie's mother, Queen of Azami, Rien Cordelia. Who mostly went by Rinko.

She took a good look at the king's face.

“Hmm... Your wife hasn't been back in over a decade, and you greet me with wrinkles?”

She had on a wide grin.

“H-h-how do you... You look exactly the same!”

“An illusion? Are you some sort of shapeshifting monster?! I haven't had that much to drink!”

Rinko puffed out her cheeks, disgruntled.

“That's just mean. But whatever, first—”

She paused dramatically, then took her hands out of her pockets, and bent down.

“Rien! That's—”

At this point, Lloyd was back in the dance hall, having spurned the princess (ha). Selen, Riho, and Phyllo all rushed at him as soon as he stepped through the doors.

“S-Sir Lloyd?!”

“That getup— You are gonna dance with—?”

“.....Hngg.”

Lloyd looked guilty, but managed a smile.

“Uh, ah-ha-ha. So...guess I can't keep it under wraps. I just told the princess I can't date her. It's way too much for me to handle.”

He just looked sorry for upsetting anyone.

Selen's face lit up in an expression of triumph. She'd been more anxious than she let on.

"See? Just like I said. Sir Lloyd's true love lies with me, and we shall share our lives—"

".....There she goes again. B-but...I'm so glad."

Phyllo patted her chest, uncharacteristically demonstrative.

Riho looked equally relieved, but still had questions she needed to ask.

"Are you sure, though? Marie—"

She thought it might be awkward to continue living together, but Lloyd jumped in.

"Yes, I can't let Marie live alone. That's why I turned her down!"

".....Um, what?"

"But...you *met* the princess, and still...?"

Lloyd gave them the full story. How he'd been too scared to look her in the face, and done the whole thing through the door. How he'd said Marie was too big of a disaster to be capable of living alone so he'd have to table this discussion until she was capable of fending for herself.

When it was all over, even Phyllo was wincing.

".....I just feel sorry for her."

"She never managed to tell him. She likely never will."

From Riho's tone, you could feel she pitied Marie, but was being plenty mean herself.

Speak of the devil—the girl herself staggered into the room, white as a sheet, the very picture of a boxer who's just done twelve rounds. Chrome was at her side, begging.

"What a lovely dress, but the person wearing it just ruins it."

No one would look at a girl leaning heavily against the wall, legs wide apart,

and think, “That must be the princess.”

Having innocently removed her from the field of prospective love interests, Lloyd saw her looking desolate, and came rushing over.

“Oh, Marie! You look exhausted. Were you invited as the country’s savior?”

“Ugh. Lloyd.”

“That dress looks lovely! Almost like a real princess.”

She *was* a real princess (LOL).

A shudder of horror passed over Chrome.

He really knows how to cut a girl to the quick...

At this point, Marie stopped caring.

“Yeah, I’m pooped,” she drawled. “How’s it going, Lloyd?”

Convinced she would *never* make him believe who she was, she was letting it all hang out.

“Hmm, you don’t look good. I know!”

An idea struck him. Lloyd took Marie’s hand, and pulled her up.

“Let’s dance! I don’t know what’s got you so down, but when you have troubles, you’ve gotta dance the night away!”

He tugged her right out onto the dance floor, and started copying what everyone else was doing. Not the best lead, but you could tell how hard he was trying.

“Musicians, match your tempo to what Lloyd’s doing. I’ll go adjust the lighting to show him off!”

Allan knew Lloyd was only dancing to cheer Marie up, but he got the orchestra and gaffer crew on board to set the mood.

“Lloyd, that’s all I can do for you now!”

He gave a thumbs-up, and Lloyd nodded, then spun Marie around.

“Feeling any better, Marie?” he asked, beaming.

More worried about Marie than any princess.

She might not be a romantic prospect, but he was more concerned about her than anyone else, and that thought brought her smile back.

“Argh...I’m so easy to please.”

She shook her head at that, but followed Lloyd’s lead.

“They’re looking good. We not gonna tell anyone she’s the princess?” Choline whispered.

Chrome gave her the full rundown.

“So we’re not going to officially name her here.”

“Ha-ha... Lord. What a pickle.”

“You can say that again,” Merthophan agreed. “Princess Maria has a long road ahead of her.”

All three of them started laughing. It was just so *her*.

“Isn’t that Lloyd?”

“He’s dancing with a real beauty.”

“That’s Marie, from the witch’s shop.”

“Oh, where Lloyd lives?”

“Takes care of his landlord.”

“A lovely pair!”

The guild members and other soldiers all watched them dancing, smiling.

“I’m not his landlord! Argh, whatever.”

“Did you say something, Marie?”

“No, never mind.”

She’d frowned for a second, but covered it with a smile.

It was a lovely moment.

But not everyone was pleased with that. Three girls were gnashing their teeth.

“She’s gotten far too carried away.”

“Anyone got a sniper rifle?”

“.....Does this call for violence? I think it does.”

As angry as they were—Micona was downright *livid*.

“What is this?! Why is Lloyd Belladonna dancing with Marie?!”

Riho narrowed her eyes. “Lloyd turned the princess down, which is great, but...”

“It is not great! My plan was to stick him and the princess together and console the heartbroken Marie while she was on the rebound!”

Blissfully unaware that Marie and Maria were one and the same, Micona was the biggest clown here.

“.....That plan was always doomed.”

“Explaining why would be a nightmare.”

Her plan’s success would thwart her actual goals.

All four girls wound up scowling at the dance floor, watching Lloyd and Marie dance—and then their savior appeared.

“Trouble?” Pamela pushed up her frames.

“Y-you’re the glasses girl!”

“The cosplay fanatic who makes Lloyd wear weird stuff!”

“.....Thanks for the nurse thing..... It was a feast for the eyes.”

She raised a hand and made a modest introduction.

“Pamela Siegquelle. Same class as Micona.”

“Pamela, trouble is the right word, but if you’re going to ask...do you have a solution?”

“Indeed,” she said, adjusting her glasses dramatically. “As the daughter of the North Side’s very own Siegquelle tailors, I prepared all manner of dancing clothes for this evening.”

“.....So?”

“I shall provide the dresses. You can mingle with the VIPs, and dance with Lloyd and Marie to your heart’s content. I get to flaunt my store’s wears to all the guilds, so we all come out ahead. What do you say?” She pushed her glasses up again.

Micona slapped her shoulder heartily.

“That’s my Pamela! Mastermind of the second year!”

“Then come this way.”

She led them all to the changing rooms. Maybe they shouldn’t have been doing this on the clock, but love conquers all.

A few minutes later, Marie was lost in the moment, blissfully happy.

Dancing in public with the boy she loved, every eye upon her.

“If only this could last forever...”

It would definitely not. Not with them around.

“Okay! Time’s up!”

“Sir Lloyd! My love tank is filled to the brim!”

“.....C’mon in.”

Three girls, waving to them like gasoline stand staff. Lloyd happily headed their way.

“Uh, yes? What is it?”

“L-Lloyd! It’s a trap...!”

But Riho already had a hand clamped on Marie’s shoulder.

“High time you swapped out.”

“B-but...you’re supposed to be working!”

“It’s our job to peel away persistent fans.”

Soldiers weren’t exactly staff at idol handshake events, but...well, both spend the bulk of their time in the trenches.

“.....Going first.”

While Riho and Selen were busy peeling Marie away, Phyllo swooped in and grabbed Lloyd.

“Argh, come back here!”

“Phyllo! That is so not fair!”

Phyllo, wearing a belly dancer’s garb, was already busting a move, Lloyd’s hand firmly in hers.

“Phyllo? Shouldn’t you be working?”

“.....I’m guarding a VIP.”

“I’m not very important!”

“.....You are to me.”

She had him pressed right up against her. No space between them. Utilizing her physique in *every* way—from prowess to hourglass.

“Time you earned your keep, Vritra.”

“This is really all I’m asked to do...”

Selen’s cursed belt snagged Lloyd, and she pulled him to her.

“.....Oh no!”

Phyllo had assumed the belt was after her, and braced to fend it off—and let him slip from her grasp.

With Lloyd in her arms, Selen was as giddy as a five-year-old opening Christmas presents.

“S-Selen, you’re also supposed to be working.”

“Sir Lloyd, a soldier’s primary motivation is love.”

“That’s the first I’ve heard of it!”

Selen was in a captivating tango gown, and her approach was passionate—so it was basically no different from her usual routine, but perhaps it was rude to point that out.

“Ohhhhhh Sir Lloyd Sir Lloyd Sir Lloyd Sir Lloyd!”

“S-Selen, are you feeling okay? You seem a bit...”

“My mind is made up! If I do not clinch my victory here, the fight may never be won!”

“What are we fighting about?!”

Lloyd was starting to sense grave danger, and seized the first chance she gave him to leap away, winding up— “L-Lloyd?!”

“R-Riho?!”

—in Riho’s arms. She had been a wallflower nearby, wanting to dance with him, but unsure how to make her move, so having him come to her—well, her heart nearly leapt out of her chest.

“I-I thought *you’d* be taking the job seriously, at least!”

“Um, I *was*...b-but then an intruder! Yes, there’s an intruder on the loose!”

“R-really? Oh, so you’re out on the dance floor searching for them. I see! Well, anything I can do to help! Let’s dance.”

“Y-yeah.”

Like the fable of the North Wind and the Sun, Riho had earned both Lloyd’s respect, and the right to a dance. Total victory.

““Argh!””

Selen and Phyllo could only watch in envy.

Speaking of envy, where had Micona gone, the personification of that sin?

She was still in the dressing room.

“This dress... No, still not right.”

There was a huge heap of castoffs on the floor around her. Not because she was being picky, either.

“Another failure?” The glasses girl pushed up her frames. “Such destructive force!”

Even Pamela was shocked. For what reason?

“Argh, too tight around the chest again! All I wish is to be by Marie’s side!”

Apparently, none of the dresses on hand were expansive enough for her bust size.

“I was prepared for waistlines, but...your bust is beyond my wildest expectations.”

“I may well have to grab some bandages and bind them.”

“That would impinge upon my honor as a tailor’s daughter! I’ll go procure some alteration tools. You wait here.” Pamela pushed her glasses up.

Pamela raced off to fetch her supplies, and Micona kept rummaging through the stash, searching for a solution.

“No use... Definitely not... Mm?”

She’d heard a strange noise, and turned toward it.

“What is it now...? Y-you’re—”

“Hngg, nobody told me I’d have a chance to dance with Lloyd! I managed to slip into the venue, but none of these dresses are small enough for me! They clearly didn’t invite anyone at the age of *nine*.”

There stood Alka. Somehow, she’d heard about the ball and was busy rifling through dresses, grumbling. Caught red-handed, trespassing and pilfering.

“Chief Alka?”

“Hng? If it isn’t Micona!”

These two had found themselves on a similar perverse wavelength before, and once more, they understood each other in seconds.

“You, too, Chief Alka?”

“Mm, I see we are both struggling to find appropriate dresses.”

Their conversation was quick.

“My classmate has gone to fetch alteration tools...”

“Do you think she’ll make it in time? Alterations for me would hardly be minor.”

There was a frustrated silence—then Micona spotted something at Alka’s feet.

“Oh? What’s this?”

“Hng? Oh! Nice work, Micona! If we play our cards right, we can cover both your bodacious bosom and my diminutive figure!”

What garments had they found? They quickly threw them on, and set out for the dance floor.

Meanwhile...blissfully unaware of this, Lloyd and the girls were still going at it.

“Riho! How is it you *always* wind up hogging the limelight?”

“.....We should take notes.”

“I didn’t—this is just...one of those things!”

But Riho was thoroughly enjoying her turn on the dance floor. So much so she couldn’t even manage a concrete excuse.

The ball was a powder keg set to go off. Marie stepped in to de-escalate.

“H-hey, now...no fighting in front of the guilds...”

““““This is all your fault!””””

“Oh, right. Sorry...”

Marie *had* kinda caused this strife, so nobody was ready to have her play peacekeeper.

“Why’s Marie looking so guilty?” Lloyd wondered, having followed none of this.

As chaos overwhelmed the ball—a rather silly-sounding flute rang out.

“Wh-what?”

“.....! Look!” Phyllo pointed.

“Micona...and Alka?!”

Indeed. The two of them stood side by side, looking very pleased with themselves.

However, they were not dressed for a Western-style ball at all. They looked ready to dance at a Bon Festival—happi coats, with sarashi cloth wrapped around their chests. Alka was busy tooting on some sort of wooden flute...but her fingers were too short to cover the holes and the notes were all over the place. Extremely dissonant.

With no dresses in their size, they'd just wound sarashi around their torsos, then threw happi coats over them and called it a day. An unorthodox approach to ballroom attire, and it was convincing no one.

"Yes, those simply won't cut it for this venue. I regret bringing them," Pamela muttered. She'd just come back in, clutching the tools of her trade—too late to stop this travesty.

Even so, Micono and Alka were pumped and raring to go. Absolutely certain they were impressing the crowd, and the two were out there living their best lives.

Alka kept honking on her flute, hopping all over the shop like the military commander Ushiwakamaru when fighting his opponents. She forced her way between Riho and Lloyd, and pulled him away.

"C'mon, Lloyd! Can't just dance with your friends, lemme have a turn!"

"Wh-what are you wearing? How are you supposed to dance in that?!"

"Any way I want to! Just like we've always done!"

Meanwhile, Micono was doing her best to coax Marie out on the floor.

"They didn't have anything that fit me, but anyone can wear this coat! Let's dance, Marie!"

"Micono? Why me? What kind of dance is this?"

"Just let it all out! A happy dance in a happi coat!"

Really, things were not working out at all. They had placed far too much faith in these outfits.

These outfits were for the Ascorbic Domain's bon odori folk dance—so one person here was vehemently objecting.

“This ain’t right!” Renge shouted.

A clan chief from the Domain, she was not about to stand idly by while these two pranced around in the traditional garb of her people.

“Mm? What does she want?”

“Back up, ladies! That ain’t how the dance goes! If you’re gonna wear these coats, you got to pour your soul into the dance!”

“R-Renge?” Micona shouted.

Renge grabbed Micona’s shoulders and forced down her center of gravity.

“Hips low! Move like you’re rowin’ a boat! Soiya soiya, that’s the beat! Pipsqueak, you too!”

“Er, but I wanna cling to Lloyd...”

“Hips low! Don’t make me say it again!”

“M-mm.”

Renge’s pride as a clan leader from the Domain was so intense that even Alka cowed.



She swung toward the orchestra and made them change up the tune to match. Sophisticated music gone out the window, it was replaced with upbeat Hayashi-style bon odori music.

In the center of the room, Renge began a Domain-style cheer. It was inappropriate for this venue and a bizarre sight to see.

Yet as odd as this spectacle was, the guild members and kingdom VIPs had enough alcohol in them to find it all delightful and even joined in.

Lloyd considered trying to stop it all...

"It's weird, but everyone's having fun, so..."

He decided to just smile and roll with it.

"Eeek!" Alka wailed. "Why are we doing a full-fledged domain dance?! That's not what I wanted!"

While the situation on the dance floor was spiraling in all the wrong directions, Rinko was with the king and Fumar.

"I'm so sorry!"

She was on hands and knees before them. Apologizing profusely for her long absence.

"No, no."

"No, no, no."

The only right reaction to a kowtow.

Rinko got back up, smiling, and took a seat.

"I wanted to get that outta the way first thing. I feel much better now!"

"Sorry doesn't settle anything!" the king said.

"Are we sure this isn't a monster or demon lord disguised as the old Rien?" Fumar asked. "I can't hardly believe it."

If she was their age, she should be nearly fifty. But the girl in front of them was clearly around twenty. That would make anyone suspicious.

When Fumar reached for his weapon, the king stopped him.

“No, that kowtow was Rien’s. I can tell.”

“Was it that distinctive?!” Fumar shouted.

“That’s my Lou! You know me, ha-ha-ha!”

Fumar just looked appalled.

“Assuming you *are* Rien,” he asked, fixing her with a glare. “You’ve gotta start by explaining how you look so young. And why you were missing for all these years. You left a lot of pain in your wake, and you owe us that much.”

She stood up and took his knife from him.

“Wh-what are you doing?”

“Watch closely, Lou.”

Without hesitation, she put the tip of the blade to her arm.

“No, don’t—”

Blood spurted out—but a moment later, the wound closed itself back up. Even the blood she’d spilled disappeared.

“Wha—?”

“And that wasn’t healing magic,” Rinko said, enjoying their reactions, but with a hint of sadness. “I’m actually immortal.”

““You’re what?””

They were in perfect harmony.

Rinko scratched her head, awkwardly. “I’m not a demon lord myself, but... we’re kinda in the same broad category.”

“O-oh...” The king’s expression grew grave. “And you left before anyone found out? No, you would have told me, or Maria...”

Rinko winced at that, and shook her head.

“Yeah, that wasn’t why. Look, you can choose to believe me or not, but...what is it that you most want in life?”

That question left them both stunned.

“I’m lost,” the king said.

Rinko nodded, anticipating that reaction.

“Status, money, love? We’re all different, I’m sure. But what I wanted most—was time.”

“Time?”

“Yep. I was a scientist, and a gamer. I loved my research, and loved playing all the newest games—it was too much on my plate! I didn’t have time to do everything.”

They weren’t sure what some of those words meant, but she kept talking.

“Then one day the possibility of being immortal popped up. There were loads of problems with it and we put it off for a while, but one of my girls wanted to give it a shot—and I didn’t stop her. And this is the result.”

She made a face.

“I guess we succeeded? Never imagined the side effects but I sure did get plenty of *time*. I worked my way through my backlog and a huge stack of retro games. I had close to one or two hundred! You play that many back-to-back, you start to get bored and wonder what else you can do with your time, and maybe go for a walk. Field work in this world was certainly novel.”

Rinko’s smile was certainly genuine.

“I had a blast comparing bits and pieces of one game with another, adventuring, having encounters. Like, whoa, real-life fantasy, rock on. I needed more information, so I figured, hey, why not round up the adventurers?”

“I can barely follow half of what you’re saying, but...you started the guild as a way of gathering intel? That’s why you’re the Adventurer Guild Master?”

“Yup. And that’s about when I met you two.”

“Right.”

“Like I said, I’m immortal. Back in the day I never even considered marriage, but now I got time, so...why not give it a shot?”

“You never did seem to take it seriously. I suppose that’s very you.”

“Ah-ha-ha! And then I had Maria.”

“Yeah.”

“Having a kid made me realize—she’s gonna die before me. I’d been able to compartmentalize everyone else regarding that, but...knowing you’re gonna watch your own kid die was a bit much.”

“So you ran?”

“I got scared. It got worse each day until I couldn’t stand it, and I left a dumb note and ran for the hills.”

“That would explain it.”

The king was nodding, but Fumar was still not on board.

“That’s a lot to process...but what brings you back now?”

“I may have found a way—to stop being immortal. A way to die with all of you.”

“Ah. Well, you always did spout the craziest stuff, and cause us to panic.”

“You would say that, Fu! Lou tended to *like* that.”

“Tch... Don’t flirt in front of me!”

“Anyway, I need your help. So we can all grow old together, and so I can see my daughter smile.”

The king was still a little rattled, but he quickly found his footing.

“You’ve never been anything near ordinary, but this sure takes the cake. Just as I thought I was getting used to Lloyd doing crazy things, this happens.”

Fumar laughed in agreement.

“If you need help, well, Luke and I can take care of most things. He’s the king, and I’ve got a foothold in every port.”

“You’ve got that old troublemaker face on again, Fumar.”

“As do you—not that I ever stopped.”

As they laughed, Rinko whispered her thanks.

“It may be a while off, yet, but...I’ll do what I can to spend my life with you both, and her.”

Her smile grew warm, and the old men looked like young boys again.

Behind them, in the dance hall, Lloyd and his friends were creating an uproar. Alka and Micona always turned everything into a squabble.

“Marie, I heard! You were abusing your authority to gain an unfair advantage!”

“Wait, Riho?! You told her! Don’t rat me out!” Marie protested, but she had no leg to stand on.

“How dare you, Marie?” Riho hissed.

“Yes,” Selen said. “Taking advantage of your superior status to deny the boy’s right to refuse? Immoral!”

Marie glared at her, clearly wanting to call the kettle black. She had every leg to stand on in *that* argument.

“You are the last person who should lecture me, Selen. And what are you doing, Phyllo?”

Phyllo was impassively encouraging Alka and Micona, as if she were a breeder at a dog show—for ninja dogs.

“.....The verdict is guilty. Go get her, Chief! Micona!”

“Argh, I am not a dog, but Marie deserves it!”

“I’ll be her dog! Dogs get free licks! Here I come, Marie!”

One seemed to take the dog thing as a badge of honor.

However, Renge was here representing the Domain, and was not about to let them go wild while wearing her homeland’s folk clothing. She grabbed them by their necks and started scolding them.

“These! Are! Ritual clothes! How dare you act out like this in them? Especially you, small child! Don’t wear a happi coat like it’s a dress! Wear it properly and never stop dancing!”

“Dang, this domain dance dame is so annoying!”

“W-woof! Marie, woof!”

Micona’s forlorn howl echoed, and Selen tried to use the chaos to pull Lloyd somewhere else.

“Come, Sir Lloyd, we must flee this scene! I’m sure they’ll forgive us later.”

“On what pretext do you foresee *that* happening, Selen?”

“.....We *will* stop you.”

Watching from the sidelines, Chrome’s square shoulders slumped wearily.

“Does anyone remember their jobs? Ugh, I just can’t. Excuse me, can I get one of those? I need a nice stiff drink that’ll make me forget how tired I am.”

He was drinking to escape! Though he probably deserved that after today’s mess.

Choline paid him no attention, and made no effort to stop anyone else, either — She was actually trying to get out on the dance floor herself.

“It’s all hands on deck now! Merthophan, shall we?”

“Mm? Me, dance? Then, like a true farmer, I shall dance the joy of a fresh harvest.”

He swiftly stripped down to his loincloth, and Choline viciously pinched his butt.

“Ya nitwit! Not the time! There’s never a time for a loincloth!”

“Mm? But the harvest—”

“You really are the dumbest!”

The sound of a butt being slapped echoed through the hall, and everyone laughed.

As students and soldiers got out of hand, Chrome downed booze like water until— “All of you... Fine! I’m gonna dance, too!”

He hadn’t drunk that much in a while. The liquor hit him hard, and he went tumbling out onto the floor, his face bright red.

“I-is that...?!”

“Colonel Chrome! Drunk?!”

Lloyd and Riho stared aghast, but there was no stopping him now.

“Rahhhh! I’ll show you all how to bust a moooooove!”

And he busted out moves like no one else, triple spins with rock-solid poise, leaps that took full advantage of the ballroom’s size—truly competition-worthy.

“My lord! Colonel Chrome! The way you dance— Azami’s Lighting Lord, Allan Toin Lidocaine is here to make you sparkle!”

No one asked for it, but Allan considerately arranged several spotlights to highlight Chrome’s rhythmic feats.

A square-jawed old man on center stage. In later days, the Azami VIP would begin calling him the Square-Jawed Dancing Fairy. Then Chrome would once again swear to never drink alcohol forever.

Rinko peered in at the chaos, smiling—and then spotted a familiar-looking kid grandma. Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Waaait...isn’t that Alka? Oh, I see. She looked after Maria for me.”

“What about her? She’s a child from around here, she gets along with Maria.”

“I guess you wouldn’t know. Never mind, Lou.”

Most people would assume the same thing.

Rinko watched Alka and Maria going at it, and smiled.

“I’m glad Alka’s enjoying life. If she learns the truth, she’ll take care of Maria for me,” she whispered, stretching. The kind of stretch you do before settling down to work. “Welp, guess I’d better get cracking if I’m ever gonna get wrinkles of my own. But I know at least one person who’ll go absolutely ballistic trying to stop that from ever happening. Gotta stop that— It’s best for everyone that way.”

This all sounded very significant. Rinko was clearly carrying a lot on her shoulders.

Chapter 4

Agents Alarmed: When the Truth is a Top Secret Mission

The ball was overrun with chaos, and wrapped up on a note that could hardly be described as magnificent. Renge wound up leading everyone in a Domain ceremonial clapping cheer—in which the vibe was similar to an “after-work kegger.”

But this went down well with most of the guild representatives. Good food, good drinks, and merriment are more fun than stiff ballroom dancing.

Everyone was also pleased to have witnessed the historic occasion—Previously, you’d stood a better chance of seeing a cryptid than the king and Captain Fumar together.

Their reconciliation was dramatic enough that every tabloid scrapped their front page in a rush to cover it, splashing grabby headlines all over a photo of the two men shaking hands. (Fumar had squeezed too hard and made the king wince— He really was an overgrown child.) By all rights, Queen Rinko’s re-emergence should have been even bigger news, but she was nowhere to be found. You’d think the king would have pushed for it—so there must have been a better reason than just “Nobody will believe she’s immortal.”

Oblivious to the movements behind the scenes, Lloyd woke up in Marie’s shop like any other day, busying himself with his morning chores.

“Hmm-hm-hm.”

The dance-with-the-princess situation was over and done, and a weight was lifted off his shoulders. He was so happy his normal life could go on that he was positively humming to himself.

“I never did get a read on the princess’s character, but the king seemed so busy he told me not to worry about a thing! I can rest easy.”

His voice had a cheery lilt to it, and he made short work of breakfast

preparations. He lightly fried some bread in a pan to dry it, then soaked it in milk and eggs before browning both sides—a bottle of honey nearby. French toast with honey—and if you sprinkled cinnamon sugar on top, the resulting harmony could bring heaven down to earth.

“Mm, that looks *good*. If I do say so myself.”

Lloyd cheerily carried it to Marie who was sitting at the table...

“.....”

...where he found her in pieces. Slumped so far back in her chair he momentarily mistook it for one of those recliners guaranteed to make you nod off.

Peak slovenliness—she hadn’t even wiped the table down. No wonder Lloyd worried.

“Wh-what’s got into you, Marie? Did Chief Alka’s pranks finally cause a mental meltdown?!”

If not, those words would.

Marie managed to turn her face his way.

“.....Never.”

“Huh?”

“I will never learn to be independent!”

“Seriously, what’s going on?”

Marie’s lips twitched, showing an *all according to plan* smile. Mastermind mode activated.

“So Lloyd, I’ll need you here forever. Oooh, French toast with honey! Been a while since you made that. So good!”

Lloyd might well never know the truth—that when he’d told the princess he had no time for romance until Marie could take care of herself, he had been talking to *her*, and that was now coming back to haunt him. That she’d made up her mind to gain no autonomy whatsoever, to keep him at her side forever. A very desperate move. Most people would have taken the hint and started

getting their act together, but...well, she'd had a bad mentor and learned all the wrong things.

"Argh, at this rate you'll be like this the rest of your life."

"Works for me! As long as I've got you looking after things!"

That's basically assisted living, Marie.

Lloyd just shook his head, like he was dealing with an unruly child.

Then Selen came in. Already at maximum giddiness, and ready to express her love for Lloyd. She arrived with such punctuality he could set his clocks to it.

"Good morning! Being fully capable of fending for myself, I, Selen, am here to collect Sir Lloyd."

Marie twitched at that dig, and Riho and Phyllo appeared behind Selen.

"Sup. Man, this whole autonomy thing sure does mean a lot of chores to do. Oh? Marie, you wouldn't know? You don't even know how to do them, was it?"

".....That barely qualifies as being a human."

Reeling from these blows, Marie immediately stood up.

"Shuddup! This is an effective strategy, don't undermine it!"

"I knew it was intentional! Your plan to use your dad's authority to force the issue backfired, so now you're taking the coward's way... At this rate, your life will never improve."

Lloyd had long since lost track of the conversation, and was just blinking at them.

Even as Marie raged, Alka and Merthophan emerged from the closet behind her.

"Oh, is that French toast I smell?!"

"Toasted wheat and cinnamon...the bounty of the field!"

Two very colorful characters, and Marie just went limp, unable to deal with the current situation.

"Ugh, so much for my pleasant morning..."

“Good morning!” Lloyd said. “I’ll go make enough for everyone!”

Very nice of him, but Merthophan bowed out fast.

“I’ve gotta get to the castle. Appreciate the offer, though.”

“I see...oh?” Lloyd blinked, and looked around.

“What is it, Sir Lloyd? If you’re searching for our marriage application, it’s right here.”

“It’s far too early for fraud.”

“.....First crime of the morning.”

Lloyd paid no heed to their usual banter.

“I just realized I didn’t see Satan. He usually pops over with you, Merthophan.”

“Ah, he’s got other things on his plate,” Alka said. “He’s been back and forth between Kunlun and Azami all night. But I’m sure it’s all for a good cause.”

Lloyd looked disappointed.

“Well, okay. I just thought the French toast turned out well, and figured Satan would love it.”

“Hngg, well, in honor of his memory, I’ll eat his share.”

“Kid grandma! Satan’s not dead yet!”

What was Satan up to? Everyone was curious, but Alka was doing her best to eat *all* the French toast, and the struggle to claim their share drove all questions out of their minds.

“Argh, there’s no peace with you around, kid grandma!”

Since everyone might be wondering, let’s go back a bit to an event that occurred the night before, as the ball was coming to a close.

Satan (aka Naruhiko Seta) was in the garden behind the dance hall with the demon lord possessing Allan’s ax—Surtr (aka Tony Glanzmann)—listening to the merriment within.

“Man, Alka said we had to rush over here... I’m not her dog!”

“I know! If there was a party like this, Allan coulda told me.”

“Relax, Tony. If you hit on a girl in that form, you’ll just scare her. And if anyone realizes we’re demon lords, it’ll be a real nightmare.”

This made sense, but Surtr was fueled by desire.

“Shut yer mouth! Setaaaa, you don’t know what it’s like! Back in school, I couldn’t find a prom date. Frankly, being an ax is inherently more appealing than my chubby teen body ever was, so this might be my one shot at love!”

That was some *true* desperation, but Satan was just brushing him off as if Surtr were a toddler throwing a tantrum.

“If I had any Tums, I’d give you one... A prom is similar to a school festival, right? Who cares.”

“It’s so much more! Argh, no use talking to a Japanese person— Prom’s more like your major national high school championship, Koshien! Ugh, I don’t even have the energy to scream about it.”

“I guess I get it. But still not worth all the uproar. I oughtta leave you in a ditch somewhere...”

These two had been frenemies since their time back in the lab.

As they went at it, someone came near.

“Now, now, Satan, you can’t just abandon thought entities while they’re possessing objects; Director Ishikura would frown *extra* hard.”

““_____?!””

Both recognized the voice, and spun around. Rinko stood there, grinning at him.

“Y-you’re...”

“Lab Chief Cordelia?! For real?!”

“Mm? Wait, I know that voice— Tony? You’ve lost weight!”

Not only was she their boss, they had reason to believe she’d caused their current predicament. Neither could hide their shock.

“W-we’ve got a *lot* of questions...” Satan said.

But Rinko was too busy celebrating. “I thought I saw a Satanic head, but I get two for the price of one! Definitely gonna need to call in some favors, here.”

“Favors without a word of explanation?! Go get Ruka and tell us the whole truth! How’d we end up like this?”

Rinko shut Surtr down with a smile.

“Oh, sorry, can’t do that yet. If Alka and I run into each other, Eug and someone worse might notice. Which is why I need *your* help.”

She didn’t seem the least bit sorry, which just convinced them both that she was truly their lab chief.

Nobody had ever been able to tell what she was thinking.

“You still taking orders from me?” she asked, pointing a finger at them. “Eug’s got her eyes on Alka, so I need you moving behind the scenes. There’s no way she’s bothering to keep tabs on the two of you, cabaret comrades.”

“Before we quibble with that phrasing, you gotta give us *something*,” Satan complained.

“What’s this?” Rinko said, smirking. “I’m the one who noticed you struggling to fit in, and helped break the ice by teasing you about that Satanic hairstyle. And you don’t owe me, Seta?”

“Ugh, if you know *that* you’re definitely real...”

“Come on, Lab Chief,” Surtr scoffed. “You know the two of us were locked in a battle over the same cabaret girl! I sure have no end of questions, but working with *him*?”

Rinko laughed out loud.

“Ah-ha-ha! That’s the point! You’ve got the same taste in women! You’re compatible! The perfect pairing! I just watched that working out a minute ago, I know I’m right.”

She spoke with conviction. Clearly referring to the king and Fumar.

“Ugh, the lab chief and her *sera sera* attitude...what a mind you have.

Wish I'd never encountered it."

Surtr retracted his head back in his sheath, but Rinko proposed a trade-off.

"Don't be like that! I'll make you a proper body in return. My intel says you were wreaking havoc in the Ascorbic Domain as a fire turtle? I can recover a fragment of your bioform and cultivate it into something pretty sweet. What do you say?"

"A body? Seriously?! For real?!"

"Of course. And as for why you wound up like this here, I'll give you what information I can. On the condition you don't tell Alka or Director Ishikura—and obviously not Eug."

"Director Ishikura, too? Why...?"

"He's, uh...maybe the worst one. Just a hornet's nest I don't wanna poke. But are you in or are you in?"

Satan nodded.

"Anything for a body," Surtr said.

Rinko nodded, and flashed them a toothy grin.

"Awesome, then I need the two of you to do spy work in Jiou and Profen. Find out what arms they got, any demon lords they're stocking, et cetera. In return —"

Her smile faded. For the first time, she looked serious.

"I'll tell you what this world is, and how things got this way. And what King Eve of Profen—President Eva—is really after."

She began revealing everything. What had happened on the day of the accident—and at least part of the truth. What they heard made them shudder.

Like actors hearing world-building secrets directly from the original author—truths beyond their wildest imaginations that left them positively dizzy. Feeling as if the very world in which they stood had transformed before them, the two demon lords exchanged glances—but found no words.

Afterword

I'm the kinda guy who remembers the tough times more than I do the good ones.

There I was, in a café, talking to my editor about where *Last Dungeon Boonies* was going next.

Me: Volume Eleven? I swear I just finished writing Volume Four.

Editor: No way, that's an exaggeration (LOL).

He totally brushed it off as a bad joke.

But seriously! That volume was extra rough. I went bald! I ran out of ideas! It got so bad I asked my editor what I should write!

I ended up boiling that plot down to a choice between "Lloyd clears a basic dungeon" or "Pirates of Selen (no plan)," and brought those two ideas to my editor who went, "Dungeon sounds good," and that's what I decided to write about.

Even this idiot somehow kept things going for eleven volumes. But really, that's all thanks to my readers— Thank you for sticking with me.

This volume was also supposed to be that "Pirates of Selen (no plan)" idea, but, uh, I knew what the misunderstanding would be, but I didn't have most important thing—the actual plot.

I mean, "no plan" was in the byline, and the misunderstanding I had in mind didn't actually fit the Pirates of Selen theme, so after a bunch of revisions, I ended up with a ball instead.

Nonetheless, there is still a trace of the piracy concept, which is why we have a Maritime Guild. Count yourself lucky Selen never came aboard, Fumar.

Next, about the new series I'm starting next month, *Believe Me, I'm a Reincarnated Sage! The Demon Lord's Been Reborn but His Memories are All*

Mixed Up was also a real struggle. I mean, it's now January 2021, but the initial proposal was accepted in November 2017. That should tell you everything.

There was just a ton of back-and-forth. The first was scrapped, and a new one was accepted, but then we went back to the original for another try— You can't just wing it like you can with your prize submissions. It *matters* now, and it felt like a real fight. But somehow we made it to print.

The illustrator for that is Nanasemeruchi, and the art is as sexy as it is beautiful. Look forward to it! Also, thank you for putting up with this obvious advertising.

Not to get too far off topic, but the initial title for that series was *I'm One of the Empire's Greatest Warriors but I've Got a Side Gig as One of the Demon Lord's Main Minions*. I'll explain more about how that change happened in the afterword to the new series, so check it out if you're curious. Look, I want it to sell, *please*.

Sorry that went on for so long. Now, it's time for the thank-yous!

To my editor, Maizo: Both this volume and the new series were a huge headache, so I appreciate your benevolence.

To my illustrator, Nao Watanuki: You not only gave life to Lloyd and company, you even made that adventurer mook with the shield look cool. I can't thank you enough! It seems such a shame to waste that design on a patsy.

To the manga artist, Hajime Fusemachi: You've taken such care adapting the aforementioned volume four. The detail put into the chaos of the dungeon conquest scenes really humbled me.

To the spin-off artist, Souchu: It always amazes me to see my text-based scripts turn out that lovely. The Saint Wart chapter had Lloyd looking so cute, and the combat scenes were really entertaining.

To the anime staff and everyone involved: It's been a heck of a year, and I'm so grateful for all your hard work. I'll be watching it on my knees.

To everyone in editing, sales, rights, and publication: I could not have done this without all of you. With your help, we were able to publish Volume Eleven, and I will continue to be in your care.

The story itself is slowly inching toward an ending. I imagined five volumes would be a lofty goal, but now I'm starting to feel like a parent and am hoping I get to carry these kids through to the finale. I hope you'll look forward to that day.

TOSHIO SATOU

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